ANC

GUNSMOKE

FINAL PAYMENT
by
Frank O'Rourke

BILL GULICK
STEVE FRAZEE
JACK SCHAEFER
BENNETT FOSTER
And others-

EVERY STORY NEW!

AUGUST 35 cents

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He had to find the killer. And the fact that the killer was his closest friend didn't make any difference . . .

Final Payment

A NOVELETTE

BY FRANK O'ROURKE

I RODE over the last of the great, long-running ridges that probed their diminishing fingers south across the state, and saw no appreciable change in Broken Bit; it was the same town sprawling below the rough country on the valley floor, with perhaps a few more shacks on the edges and more small farms dotting the open ground. Nothing else was added or subtracted; nothing but the people and they weren't so much changed as older, or dead, or born. I pulled up before the hardware store and went inside, stepping back fifteen years to the same shelves and odors and man I had known in my youth.

"Hello, Jim," I called. "How are

you?" He was alone.

He was fiddling with the dash of a wooden churn, the plunger brightened by an overhanging lamp that cast irregular shadows above its reflector cone. He said, "Hello, Henry," and came toward me, wiping his fingers and face on a piece of gunny sacking. He was rounder and thicker in the cheeks, his hair thinner behind his ears and sticking from beneath a green-visored clerk's cap. His nose seemed fleshier and redder, the pores wider and deeper from years of working on hardware and churns and guns.

"Alone?" I asked.

"Let's go inside," he said, motioning to the inner office.

I followed him into this private room and took one of the bow-backed chairs beside the rolltop desk. He sat opposite me in the swivel chair and pushed nervously at a fat ledger and lit a cigar; when he smiled faintly I knew why his cheeks seemed wider. He had upper and lower plates which gave the cheeks that exaggerated look of leathery brown over-fullness against the startling dead white enamel of the teeth and the false red of the carved gums.

"You didn't say much in your letter," he said quietly.

"Couldn't," I said. "Where is he, Jim? I've got a letter for him."

"You've been away some time," he said. "You're a man now, Henry. I don't know you so well. What does the letter say?"

I handed it to him and watched his rough, scarred fingers open it delicately. I remembered him as a young man with those same curious, never silent fingers. He had a habit in those days of absently rubbing the fingertips across his eyes, wiping away the fresh, salty sweat. It was a small thing to remember but helped bring him into proper perspective. I watched him read the letter slowly, shaping the words with his full lips and finally pushing his glasses up on his forehead and digging at his eyes with that same tired, gentle movement. But he was older, I knew then, for he pushed the glasses up like an old man instead of taking them off.

"I understand now," he said. "That's a fine letter, Henry. And signed by the governor and the attorney-general and you. I imagine you know what it says?"

"Every word," I said. "We've got to get those men, Jim. He can tell us where they are. He doesn't owe them a thing, Jim, and you know he can't hide out much longer. This gives him a chance to start over again. A full pardon with no strings attached, no parole to serve. He can go away and begin a new life. You keep that letter and let him read it, if he won't talk to me. Any way to make him understand we're playing square. What do you say, Jim?"

His tired eyes blinked at me. "What makes you think I know where he is, Henry?"

"You bought ten boxes of shells a week ago," I said gently. "We

don't blame you, Jim. I'd do the same thing in your position."

He flushed and his fingers caressed the edge of the heavy bond paper, as if feeling a certain affinity between that symbol of official power and the ten boxes of shells. We sat in the little office through a heavy moment of treacly silence while he stared somberly at his desk, removing his glasses and rubbing the frames with one finger, feeling the smooth curve of the metal rims. Finally he nodded.

"All right," he said. "I had a feeling I was watched. I forgot about buying so many shells at once." He looked up and his eyes frowned at me. "But I took them from here, my own store."

"You made out the charge slip to your own account," I said. "We found it in the ledger, Jim. I'm sorry we had to do it."

"Where will you be about eight tonight?" he asked.

"The hotel," I said.

"I can't promise you anything," he said. "You understand that?"

I said, "Of course. I'll be in my room, Jim."

And then we had nothing more to say. It was strange not to talk about his continued growth in the store and my success in state affairs, and about all the people we had known, and still knew, as two old friends would normally do when they met after eight years. But we had no more to say, and he stirred uncomfortably and led me out of the office and stood beneath the smoky lamp, his face sagging with more worry than such a fine man deserved. I wondered how much he remembered and how far back his thoughts were flying. There wasn't any more to say, or do, for the present; it was up to him now.

I said, "Thanks, Jim," and left him beside the churn, one hand already reaching for the dasher.

I rode a block west on Main and registered at the hotel. I did not know the clerk. He had either moved to town or grown up from the vast anonymity of youth in my absence. He was a boy with puppy-soft brown eyes set wide in a serious, friendly face. He gave me a corner room on the top floor and did not recognize my name. That was good. I carried my valise upstairs and down the dark, narrow hall and locked my room door behind me. All I could do was wait for darkness and think of Billy McKay and the past that could never be changed and relived to suit our selfish little wishes, always wished too late.

Jim McKay was ten years older than Billy, already head clerk in Simonsen's hardware when Billy and I were finishing school in Broken Bit. Billy was my best friend, a tall boy with blue, laughing eyes and strong, bold features, growing up with as much chance to get ahead as any of us, excepting those boys blessed with well-to-do or influential fathers. I was in that category twofold; my father was well-to-do and

influential. The McKays had died some years before and Jim had carried the family burden ever since finishing his schooling and going to work for Simonsen.

We all make wonderful plans in our youth. My course in life was not so much a plan as a certainty. My father was a lawyer, the first in Broken Bit, and prominent in the fledgling politics of our newly created state. He helped found the state college in the capitol and it was ordained that I go there, get my degree in law, and then follow in my father's footsteps. Our state had always been a one-party affair and would be forever unless the world turned upside down; and while politics was firmly established in the hands of a few men, with all the faults and vices so well known, it was not cut from the same predatory and vicious mold as were many such organizations in the older eastern states. A man could enter politics in the west and still keep his honor and dignity; with us it was more a matter of getting good things for our state, rather than milking away the natural resources for our own individual benefit.

Billy had plans. He was going to attend the state college with me and become an engineer and start his own construction company. We laughed in those days at how, once we were grown, I would throw juicy plums to him and he would return the favors in certain well-known ways. Jim did not throw cold water on the idea but he knew that someone like the McKays, with no money or influence, would have a tough row to hoe. Jim wanted Billy to homestead some of the yet unclaimed land in the northern hills and build up his own cattle spread; it was the surest and best way for a young man to make good in our state. But he never pressed Billy to do this; and we enrolled at the college together.

I stayed at the governor's home and Billy had a room downtown in a boarding house and worked in the Cattlemen's Saloon nights and weekends to help pay his own way. Time and circumstances pulled us apart before the year was half finished. I did not go home to Broken Bit the following summer, but worked in the office of a law firm to gain experience. Billy came to me that spring and asked for help in getting a job that would save him some money for the second year. My father used his influence to get Billy a job with a man who ran one of the biggest ranches in the southwestern part of the state. His spread paid higher wages than the small ranches in our area and while Jim argued against it, mostly because he wanted Billy near him, he bowed to the logic of good pay.

No one will ever know when Billy changed. It was one of those conditions that grew and formed and blossomed unseen, affected by the wild times and the wish for all things just out of reach; and for a

variety of other, indefinite reasons all of us know but never fully understand. My first intimation of what was slowly happening occurred immediately after college began the next fall. Billy came to the governor's home and had me called downstairs. He looked worried and much older. He was changed.

"Henry," he said. "I need some money. Can you help me out?"

"Sure," I said. "How much, Billy?"

"I need five hundred dollars," he said.

"What —!" I said. "I thought —"

I thought he meant twenty or thirty to tide him over a week or two, pending a final month's pay or money from Jim; but I didn't have anything approaching five hundred dollars. Something was dead wrong.

"What for?" I asked. "You know I don't have that kind of money, Billy."

"Your father has," he said. "Write him. Listen —" and then I saw he was desperate — "I've got to have that money in a week."

"But why?" I said. "You worked all summer for Patton. Where's all that money?"

"Are you my friend?" he said shortly. "Friends don't ask questions, not real friends." He smiled and his eyes tried to beat me down. "I just need the money."

"I'll try," I said, "but I can't promise you anything. I'll write my father first thing in the morning."

"Write him tonight," Billy said. "Don't waste time. I'll get it on the night train."

I wrote my father but he saw through all my stumbling lies and telegraphed back a blunt refusal. He told me I was a fool and he was informing Jim at once. I could understand his refusal; after all, he had gotten that job for Billy and was now confronted with the fact that Billy evidently hadn't appreciated his effort.

It came out ten days later. Billy had fallen in with a fast moving, wild crowd of boys our own age, and a couple of old-timers. On a spread as big as Patton's, with the west line bordering rough country, it was inevitable that somebody would continually be driving off a few steers for quick, easy money. Billy had played poker with the other boys, got in over his head, and faced the wrath of two tough waddies. The next step was helping them run off a few of Patton's steers; it looked so easy to him, once he started. His share paid off his poker debts; then he kept doing it and got more easy money and played poker and lost, and had to do it again. He wasn't smart enough to see the final reckoning. Patton's foreman liked Billy but when he caught two of those tough waddies hazing half a dozen fat steers into the west breaks, where Billy was supposed to be riding line, he knew. He told Patton and after that, which was just before school started, things came to a head. Patton didn't

want to press charges because, as he told us later, he felt that Billy was all right and simply influenced by older men. But he knew that Billy had to be snubbed up fast and tight, right then, to save future trouble. He let Billy come back to the capitol and then cornered him and laid down the law; he gave Billy one week to get five hundred dollars which by no means would cover the total loss of those rustled steers. Patton was stern but fair; more than fair.

Billy couldn't raise the money and Patton did the next best thing. His foreman rode in and beat Billy to a pulp. Jim came down and took him home, up on the river to a little hunting cabin. Billy stayed there all winter, getting over a smashed nose and broken arm and, worst of all, those injuries no one could see: the wounds in his mind and heart and soul. He disappeared the next spring and we did not hear from him for three years. He came home the summer of the third year and I saw him again, the first time since I tried to see him after his beating and he refused to open the cabin door.

He rode into Broken Bit on a big buckskin. He wore flashy clothes and smoked cigars. He stayed at the hotel and spent his days hanging around the saloons and Jim's little hardware store, talking rough and sneering at everyone. He ran around with a girl named Sadie, drinking too much and scattering money with unbelievable largesse for such a small town. I met him at the hardware three days after his arrival. I had just ridden up from the capitol and dropped in to say hello to Jim. He stood beside the rolltop desk, staring at me narrowly, his face laughing with some secret, hidden mirth that was actually not laughter. I never forgot how he looked.

He wore a snowy white shirt and red string tie beneath a silver-stitched Mexican jacket. He had a pair of handmade, gold-embossed boots with fine black trousers tucked carelessly into the tops. His face was twisted to the left, permanent memento of that terrible beating, so that his nose, humped and crooked, gave a half-snarl to his mouth that destroyed all its humor and made his eyes flat pale lakes of icy blue. His hair was the same, deep yellow and long on his neck. He was hatless; only on jobs did he wear a hat. Later on he dyed his hair black or brown. But not at that time.

"You didn't know Billy was home, did you?" Jim said awkwardly.

"No," I said. "How are you, Billy?"

"Hello, lawyer," he said softly. "By God, you're beginning to look like one. Getting fat and sly like your old man and the rest of the politicians. Just about ready to hang up your shingle." His eyes glittered meanly. "You wouldn't be needing a small loan, would you, about five hundred or so?"

"No, Billy," I said stiffly. "But I'd like to shake hands and see you

act like a human being instead of a spoiled brat."

He came from the desk, his fingers closing. Jim said, "Now —" but I motioned him back and said, "I'm not so fat, Billy. I'm not so big either, but I'm in good shape. You're soft and you look it. I'll tie you in a knot and spit in your eye if you want it that way. But I'd rather shake hands and see you act like a man."

He still had something good in him. He smiled and relaxed his fists, changing to that forgotten blue-eyed boy, my old friend. He said, "I'm sorry, Henry. Don't ask why. You're right. I was acting like a damned fool kid. Shake."

We talked about the old days for two hours and he seemed to remember the same things and become the same old Billy; but not quite. I did not see him again until the day I visited him at the state prison, three years later. Then it seemed to be gone, all of the goodness, and he with it.

I suspected, of course, that the horse and clothes and money were coming to him by illegal means in those early days; and I was right. He had drifted all the way and gotten in with the wrong crowd. But he was clever, and with another man, kept their record absolutely clean, just so long as they stuck to small-time robbery and the like. And even after they began robbing banks and offices and stores, they managed to remain unidentified. He wasn't caught until his ego got the best of him and he brought his gang back to rob the old hometown bank. Then it was too late; he was bad, all the way through. He had four men with him, all of them equally bad and dangerous. Murder was not one of the charges against them. But that was pure luck. They ran out of that precious commodity the day they tried to rob the bank.

By that time I was firmly established with a law firm in the capitol, so I wasn't home. But my father was. He was talking with his friend, the bank president, when they entered. He was there when they shot their way out; but he didn't know it then, for he was dead. No one knew who fired the shot; too many were fired in the bank and outside in the street. Three of them were killed but Billy and another one got away. Twenty people identified him without question. In the mixup his hat came off and despite the black hair dye he was the same Billy McKay they all knew. He was a fool.

They were blocked in and pinned down for three days. The other one got away but Billy was trapped. They wounded him in the shoulder and took him without a struggle, trying to cross a river fifty miles south of town.

It is no use remembering my thoughts at that time, or my hatred. I wanted to see him hang but under the laws of our state, he was saved from the rope because they could not prove he had fired the shot that

killed my father. He was sentenced to life imprisonment and my only satisfaction was seeing him the day he entered state prison and telling him, to his face, that he would never be pardoned as long as I lived.

"Tell me something I don't know, lawyer," he said harshly. "Stop the jabber. It's too late."

"Yes," I said. "It's too late. I hope you live a hundred years — inside."

He was a model prisoner. I kept a close watch on his record but during the war I was gone two years in Cuba and the east. On my return, with some of the hatred dissolved by time, I plunged into politics and did not give him much thought. He was still there, behind the walls, and that was all that mattered.

Election year was approaching and our party had fences to mend, a thousand jobs to do before the votes were counted. I took only a few hours to make certain he was getting the most tiring, miserable jobs possible, and after that was plunged into endless work. I did not go back to Broken Bit. I lost track of Jim, other than learning that he visited Billy regularly. But no effort had been made to apply for a parole. He was just another number, and Jim seemed to be satisfied.

He broke prison in July. When they checked up, and it took them a month, it was apparent Billy had planned his break for years. He used a forgotten ventilator boarded up years before, a crude homemade saw and hammer and some nails. He slipped into the ventilator, closed it behind him, and came out on the ground floor behind the stables. He knew prison routine perfectly and had timed the break so that he rode out, actually, in the back of the warden's buggy and, when the warden stopped to visit a friend, calmly got out and disappeared. There was more to it, but there is no use telling everything. He simply got away.

We did all the usual things. We placed a watch on Jim night and day, and went over the country around Broken Bit with a fine-toothed comb. We didn't find him. My theory placed him in the hills along the river and the bad part was that no one could adequately search that wild, hilly region which extended for over two hundred miles along the northern boundary of our state. All we could do was wait and watch; and then other events changed our plan.

It began in early summer. Numerous stores, and finally the smalltown banks, were robbed in the southwestern part of the state, and after Billy's escape the Broken Bit bank was robbed and three people were killed. From this we established one pertinent fact: the leader was that fifth man who had escaped five years before when Billy was captured. Two tellers who had been in both robberies recognized his face. We reached a natural conclusion:

that man had contacted Billy and, undoubtedly, though we had no proof, had aided his escape from prison, and was hiding out either with Billy or somewhere near him in the river hills.

A week later they robbed another bank three hundred miles west of Broken Bit, killed one man, and again got away. We had another fact by then, based on a report sent in by one of our men. Jim forgot himself and charged ten boxes of shells to his own account. He hunted very little. That was too much ammunition for one man. We were certain that Jim was in contact with Billy. That was my reason for driving to Broken Bit with a letter from the governor for Billy. It had been my idea from the start.

During our daily conferences, after we realized it was impossible to get them in a few days' time, I thought of the pardon idea. Innocent people were being killed by a pack of bloody murderers and everyone was beginning to mutter about the slackness in our state administration. It was an unfair rumor, for our attorney-general and the entire state sheriff's office were devoting all their resources to the job. It wasn't through slackness or lack of intelligent methods that we had not caught them but simply because our state was a wild, rugged country along the river. An army was needed to comb those canyons and timber breaks. After the shell tip, proving that Jim was in contact with Billy, I swallowed my personal hatred and suggested we offer Billy a full pardon to tell us how to get that gang.

I believed it the only quick way. I also believed, inwardly, that Billy still possessed some decency and honesty, and needed only another chance to become a decent citizen. I used my influence with the governor, and he agreed. We composed the letter and I wrote Jim to expect me up for a visit; and that is why I stood so long in my hotel room, staring unseeing across Broken Bit, thinking of the past and the things we could never change.

I heard the soft tap on my door at exactly eight o'clock. I had gone downstairs at six for a tasteless meal and returned to the room at once, to sit before the window and watch darkness fall across the town, broken on street corners by the new gas lamps which, in their flickering way, were a part of the gradual change in this town. I turned at the knock and said, "Yes?"

"Henry?"

"Yes," I said. "That you, Jim?"

His voice was thick and slowed by a mixture of caution and anxiety. He said, "Meet me downstairs, Henry, behind the hotel."

"How soon?" I asked.

"Right away. Let me get downstairs, then come on."

I said, "I'll be there," and swallowed a host of other questions. I slipped into my coat and waited three minutes and then went out and down the back stairs to the

street that ran behind the hotel. I stood on the warped sidewalk and shivered slightly, and Jim drifted across the street and touched my arm.

"Did you see him?" I asked.

He coughed softly. "He read the letter, Henry."

He wouldn't commit himself to me and I knew he did not trust me completely. He kept glancing up and down the silent street. I knew someone was watching us from the darkness; it was growing foggy and the new gas lamps collected a damp yellow aura about their oval globes on the distant corners. October was slipping from its fall crispness into the frost of winter.

"What did he say?" I asked. "I'm sorry if I sound impatient, Jim, but time is precious."

"I'm mixed up myself," Jim said heavily. "He read it and said it was a nice offer and he admired you for making it because he knew how hard it must have been for you to make that kind of a decision —" Jim swallowed and looked across the street.

I knew what Billy McKay meant and it gave me a hollow feeling. I said, "Is that all? Did he come to a decision?"

"He wants to see you, if you'll come."

"Of course I will," I said. "Right now, Jim?"

He nodded. "Come on."

I followed him across the street into the darkness of the alley stretching northward between two sheds. I heard someone breathing thickly nearby; it was getting colder.

"I'll have to blindfold you," Jim said.

"Go on," I said. "Anything to settle this, Jim."

He pulled a big bandanna from his back pocket and knotted it tightly over my eyes and nose. "Here's a horse," he said. "Get up, Henry."

I heard the horses coming from some spot up the alley. I touched hair and then the saddle, and Jim guided my hands to the reins and horn. I swung up and settled myself solidly, and heard two other men get up on my flanks. Jim leaned over and said, "I've got a lead rope on your horse, Henry. Give him his head and hang on."

I said, "All right, Jim," and tried to relax.

We rode up the alley and then began doubling back and forth until I was mixed up on my directions. Finally we cleared town and the horses were urged to a gallop. We rode three hours, on back roads, then into the hills and through canyons where the air turned colder and slapped my face with its bite. Gravel and small rocks bounced from the trail. We turned up a long grade and dipped into another canyon and crossed a narrow plank bridge and entered some kind of shed. I felt the difference in the air and the slight pressure on my ears.

"Get down," Jim said.

I dismounted stiffly and waited

for his next command. A door opened and Jim took my arm and led me through that door and across a plank floor, up a flight of squeaky stairs, through another door, into the warm, stale air of a tightly closed room.

Billy McKay said, "Take off his blindfold."

I pulled the bandanna down around my neck and looked at him, my eyes blinking against the sudden glare of the oil lamp hanging from a center cord. He sat behind a kitchen table with a .45 in one hand, the muzzle pointing carelessly at the floor.

"How are you, Billy?" I said. "It's been a long time."

"Too long," he said. "Sit down, Sit down, Jim. Don't stand there like a stuck hog. You make me nervous."

Jim McKay had stood silently behind me all this time, and now said, "Excuse me, Billy," and let his heavy body down on one of the bow-backed kitchen chairs against the wall.

I crossed to the other side of the room and took another chair and placed my hands on my knees. His name was Billy McKay, but he was a stranger. His hair was dyed a muddy brown and had grown long and unkempt over his ears and down his neck. His face was an unhealthy white and he wore a week's beard that lay thick and black on his hollow cheeks and over the square but loose-chinned jaw. He had lost weight in the shoulders and arms. He seemed bent over, sitting in the armchair, and his fingers were calloused and scarred, the nails split and dirty. All these physical changes were on the surface, and then I looked at his face and eyes, and I did not know him.

His eyes had a washed out sheen, a savage and faraway gleam that contracted the pupils and made his gaze go through me, far away, searching for something unseen. His crooked, smashed nose accentuated the cruelness of his mouth, and when he smiled faintly, I saw his teeth. Once beautifully white, they were now yellowed and touched with brown specks.

"Had a good look?" he asked sharply.

"You've changed," I said.

"You ought to know," he said bitterly. "You pulled the strings and I worked on all the miserable, stinking, dirty jobs they could find in that hell hole."

"Billy," Jim said. "Don't —"

"Shut up!" he said. "Sit over there and keep your face closed. I'm doing the talking."

"All right," I said. "I pulled the strings. You deserved it. I came here to talk business, Billy. You read the letter, didn't you?"

He lifted it from the table and shook it gently. "A nice little document, Henry. Tell me, how much did you have to do with offering me this pardon?"

"What's the difference?" I said.

"There it is. Do you accept the offer?"

"Of course he does," Jim said quickly. "Don't you, Billy?"

"Now, now," he said. "It makes a lot of difference. Don't you remember what you told me the day I went up, Henry? No parole, never, not while good old law-abiding Henry lived. That's the difference. I'm wondering why you changed your mind, and if you helped engineer this deal."

"I helped," I said. "I'm not trying to conceal my motives, Billy. We want that gang and we want them fast. I'd be pretty selfish if I put personal matters before the public welfare of my state."

"I'll be damned," he said softly. "You really mean it, don't you? Old Henry giving up his nice tidy little revenge for the good voters of his state. I couldn't believe it when I read the letter."

Jim McKay moved restlessly on his chair and I knew he was worried and inwardly angry about Billy's attitude. I wanted to pat him on the back, good old faithful Jim, and tell him that I had expected this conversation, that it wouldn't have been natural for Billy to talk business before he lambasted me with the accumulated anger and hate of eight years.

"Now, Billy," Jim said. "You shouldn't talk to Henry like that."

"Listen," he said coldly. "I told you once to shut up. Butt in again and I'll see you won't talk for a week. And I mean that too!"

I wanted to protect Jim all I could. I said quickly: "You read the letter, Billy. I told you why I brought it. What do you say?"

He stared at me and in that moment I cursed myself for being a complete fool. I had no idea where we were, or what he was going to answer; but I sensed what his answer would be. He wanted to play with me like the cat pawing a mouse, draw me out and make me sweat pure, unadulterated blood, and in this way have his revenge for the hell on earth I had promised him eight years ago. I could see the feeling in those pale blue eyes. Then he began to talk to me, ignoring Jim completely, and even speaking to me his words went past my head, meant for something more, something bigger, than just the room. We were alone in that room then as if Jim no longer existed, and no one else would ever hear.

"What do I say?" he said, finally. "Remember the time I needed five hundred dollars and your old man turned me down cold? I wasn't bad then, no matter what he or anybody else thought. Sure, I'd helped haze off a few of Patton's steers. All summer I worked for Patton, and all summer I kept thinking how men like your old man helped other men like Patton chase off the little guys, the two-bit homesteaders and small spreads, so Patton could keep the big grass ranges and the best waterholes. All legal, sure, but not so good

when you know all the story. I kept thinking about that, Henry, and about myself. There I was, riding herd on thousands of dollars, thinking about the things a few dollars would buy. I got in with a wild bunch, sure, and we sold a few steers. Plenty of men in this state have done that, but Patton needed a sucker and I was the best bet. I had to pay the piper. And then your old man turned me down. I felt pretty good that fall, Henry, just for a little while. I wanted to come back to school and study hard and get that engineering degree and make all our dreams come true. What was the use? You know how the dreams turned out. Patton had me beat damned near to death, and did anybody do anything about it? Hell, no. I was the little man, and I took it."

"My father wasn't —" I started to say, wanting to tell him that my father had never accepted a bribe in his life; but something stopped my voice, for I knew there was a great deal of truth in his words. It was a bad, unwashed feeling, having someone like Billy bring out the dirty underwear and hang it on the line.

"Shut up," he said softly. "I'm not done, Henry. Listen to me. I went away, didn't I, and when I came home I showed you that Billy McKay wasn't down and out. I didn't ask for handouts or apologies. I had money and how I made it was my own business. Want to know how — " he laughed harshly — "I made that money? Rolling drunks, doing all the stinking penny-ante things, learning the hard way. I learned and I didn't get caught. You want to know why I wasn't caught? Because I had a friend. Maybe he wasn't the kind of a guy you'd endorse, but he never ratted on me, he never crossed me, and his shirt was mine if I opened my mouth."

I knew one thing then; the pieces were beginning to dovetail together. I said, "And he left you on the river bank, didn't he, eight years ago?"

"Sure he did," Billy said, "but not the way you mean, lawyer. You're smart. You put things together. You know who I mean. Fine. I'm glad you do. I'll call him Joe, just so you won't be asking what his name is. He left me because I made him clear out. He wasn't hurt. I was. And he got away, didn't he?"

"And he's back up here now," I said. "With a few more like him. They've robbed enough banks and stores. They've killed four innocent people, Billy, and they'll kill more unless we get him and the others. He's your friend, Billy, and he kills innocent people for no reason. You aren't a killer, Billy. I know that —"

"How do you know?" he asked softly. "Just how do you know, Henry? You don't know who got your old man that day, do you?"

"I don't," I said, "and I never will, but that has nothing to do with the present situation. You've had your fun now, making me squirm

and worry. I admit it — I have. All right, what do you say? Will you tell us where they are, or how we can get them? Say the word and you're a free man."

"I wasn't finished," he said, "but maybe I said enough. So you want them, do you, Henry? You want them because people are starting to talk about how lousy your administration is, and election is just three weeks off, and innocent people are being killed. I wonder if the killing part doesn't come last, the way you and the governor and the rest of your crooked outfit figures. I wonder. So you want them. All right, I'm going to give them to you, Henry."

"Good boy," Jim said thickly. "Good boy, Billy."

He had a shining, half-mad twist on his face and I wondered what he meant to do next. Then I knew. He got up, stooped over so much I winced, his once fine shoulders thinned out to the point of emaciation. He placed his .45 on the table and lifted two more guns from a drawer. He placed them on the table and lifted his own gun and said, "Turn around and back over here."

"Why —?" I said.

"Shut up!" he said coldly. "Back up."

I turned around and walked on my heels until the table hit me. He lifted my coat and pushed a gun in each of my hip pockets. Then he stepped against the wall and said, "Turn around."

I faced him, feeling the dragging weight of those .45s in my hip pockets.

"So you want them, do you?" he said. "Well, you'll have all the chance in the world to get them, Henry. You've got two loaded guns in your pants. Just keep your hands at your sides. Now turn around and open that door and go downstairs to the shed. When you get there, you better stop and do some planning because that's where you can start getting them if you want them so bad. There's a farmyard around this house, Henry, some buildings and fences and machinery and trees. I'll even give you a good tip. There's five of them outside, around the house. You've got plenty of shells. I understand you're quite a shot. What could be fairer? You give me a pardon and I give you their exact position. Hell, I'll even tell you where two of them are." He grinned and his yellow, dirty teeth glinted dully in the bright, white light from the single lamp. "One in the barn, one in the trees. Just like a riddle, Henry, or a ball game. I give you two strikes. How's that for being fair? Go on. Go down and get them. You —"

Jim McKay had sat through this unmoving, and now his chair tipped back and clattered on the board floor as he stood and took three steps toward his brother. His face was a mixture of anger and surprise and humiliation; and I could understand his thoughts in this moment.

For months he had risked everything, helping his brother, believing in him, undoubtedly listening to Billy McKay lie himself black in the face about his good intentions. And now he saw everything, too late.

"Billy," Jim McKay said hoarsely. "You're crazy. You told me you hadn't done anything with those men. You told me you would tell Henry, and accept that pardon. Are you crazy, Billy? What in God's name is the matter with you? Put down that gun and talk sense. I brought Henry here in all fairness and he came the same way. You want to kill him?"

"Listen," Billy said, in a dead, even voice. "Sit down and shut up. Brother or not, I'm running this show. You forget too easy, Jim. You think I've forgotten everything this crooked politician did to me? Sit down!"

"No," Jim McKay said. "I won't let you do it. Give me that gun, Billy."

Jim started toward him. He got within two steps before Billy moved. I saw it coming and wanted to cry a warning, but it was useless. He swung the heavy gun and hit his brother a vicious, hard blow full on the side of his face. Jim dropped without a moan, or sound, and lay in a thick, untidy heap on the floor. I prayed in that moment that he wasn't killed by the blow.

"Now," he said. "We'll get back to you, Henry. Jim's a damned fool. I don't want to kill him. He won't be in a position to talk, anyway, later on. Drawing from your great knowledge of the law, wouldn't you say I'm right?"

"No," I said deliberately. "You're wrong, Billy. He was blind before, but he knows now that you aren't what he thought, or maybe dreamed. He knows you've tricked him into bringing you food and shells and the news. He knows you lied about your old friend and his gang. I know myself. You're thinking, Billy, that he won't talk because it means being an accessory and according to our laws would give him about twenty years. You're wrong. He'll talk and I don't think you're quite rotten enough to kill your own brother or I wouldn't be telling you how I feel."

"Thank you," he said. "I'll remember your kind words. Now, where were we . . . you know where they are. You can be a hero. Go on down and cut yourself a slice of the next governor's chair, a seat in the senate two years from now. Haven't I done what you wanted? What are you waiting for, Henry? Go on down."

I could not have found the words to speak if I had been able to open my mouth, and as there are moments when a man cannot think or see or hear, he also has that one time when words are buried beneath an avalanche of memories which crowd out the futile words and race madly through his mind and tell him more, in seconds' time, than hours of

speech. I looked at Billy McKay and felt the heavy, sagging, dead weight of the .45s in my pants pockets and felt the tiny beads of sweat burst on my skin and dampen my shirt and legs. I saw the room around him, dirty and dusty and filled with the smells and pieces of past weeks spent in shadows, behind drawn curtains and closed doors; and I could understand how he had waited for me, building up a case in his mind until it was right, irrevocably right, and nothing could change it for him.

He wanted me, as I had wanted him, and on me was being placed all the built-up weight of those years in prison and the years before that, as if by sending me out to certain death, he could impress on my mind and senses all the fear and pain and frustration he had suffered in his life which, to all intent, was finished as surely as if he were now dead. I think he knew, or felt this, for he stared at me and waited for me to do the thing he expected: refuse to go outside, crawl on the floor, beg him not to send me out to be shot down like a dog. He wanted that. He had dreamed about it. He had lived it in his mind until, perhaps, the reality was not so good as the dream; but still he wanted to see me crawl and cry and beg for my life instead of tossing him the magnificent gesture, the bone really, of a parole and watching him rat on his ratty friends. He had dreamed it all, and now he watched me and waited expectantly for me to break.

I was never over-possessed with courage and never with foolhardiness; but I had inherited from my father and mother those principles of right and wrong they had lived by, and a stern, unbending belief in the fact that a man could not kneel to something false and cruel, and ever be a man again. Sometimes I think that is the reason for all war, I don't know for sure, but it seems to have a grain of truth in its shell. I looked at Billy McKay and thought, "You poor, damned fool!" and remembered my father as he had been in life, unbending, often wrong, but never a coward.

Nor could I forget Jim's position, unconscious on that dirty floor, completely at his brother's mercy, certain to call the law if they let him go, for his ideals and courage and sense of rightness were stronger than a broken love for a brother who was, if I guessed correctly, no longer a brother in his mind. I had to do something to help Jim.

"All right," I said. "There's the letter. It's your passport. We gave you our word and we'll keep it. You say one in the barn, one in the grove. These guns loaded fully?"

"Yes," he said thinly. "Why?"

"More chance," I said evenly. "That makes twelve shells. Thanks for telling me how you feel, and showing me what you really are. It makes things clearer, and easier. That's what I came for."

I turned and then I had to open

that door quickly and go down the stairs before my legs gave way under my trembling body. I remember his face as I turned, drained of all color, the unhealthy white skin hanging lax over the bones, the eyes suddenly blank and unbelieving, struggling with an unsolvable problem. Then I opened the door and went down those squeaky stairs into the shed, which was built against and into the farmhouse. I stood in the pitch black silence of the rectangular room, smelling dust and dry manure, and after a few seconds was able to see the small window in the back wall, the sky shining faintly through the pane. The horses were no longer in the shed. They were led out after I went upstairs, and were hidden outside, out of my reach, in case I had been tempted to try a dash from the shed. Only their smell remained, the hair and sweat and a faint odor of dust.

I knew the shed door opened out and back, and I felt almost certain that one of them would be lying just a little distance away, watching for me to come bumbling out to the slaughter. They would play with me as long as possible, get me to waste all my ammunition, and then close in like a pack of hungry jackals and fill me full of lead.

I wondered, standing silently on the packed dirt floor, if Billy intended to come downstairs and get into the game after I left the shed. It seemed to me that he would want to be the one who made the first and last shot good; it would be the culmination of everything for him.

Time would not stand still. I could not stay in the shed and wait for them to make the first move. I had to do something. I walked carefully to the far wall, and along that to the doors, and stood holding my breath, listening to the night sounds outside. I could hear nothing. I felt cautiously for the lock, or bar, which held the doors shut; it was a simple wooden bar dropped into cleats. I lifted it out and stepped back against the wall. The doors creaked and began opening. They were counter-balanced, I knew then, and would fall back and stay open when the bar was lifted. And they did; and I flattened myself against the wall and watched them swing and let my eyes open wide and become accustomed to the outer darkness.

The first shot came from my side of the garage, outside and beyond my range of vision. I went down on my stomach and eased myself to the door and looked through the crack between the door butt and the jamb.

I saw the farm wagon pulled up beside the pump, about twenty feet from the doors, and the dark mass of wagon and pump seemed too fat and thick and black for just wheels, box, and pump. Someone was in that wagon box, I felt sure, sitting on sacks for quietness, with a few sacks strung over the sides to deaden movement. Him first, I thought, and kept on crawling. I came around the

open door, holding steady on that indistinct wagon box shadow, and kept on going for the deeper shadows beside the shed.

I felt for a rock, found one, and tossed it high toward the side of the house. It hit and rattled, and the wagon box spouted flame. Then they all began shooting and I lay still and watched them. One was in the barn. One in the grove, all right. Billy hadn't lied. One in the wagon box. One in the corncrib. And one in the hogyard, behind the trough and thick board fence. They had the yard completely surrounded; they were so sure of themselves they didn't change position after they fired.

I aimed carefully at the spot on the wagon box where I had seen the gun flame. I fired twice, spacing the bullets about two feet apart. The first one brought a yell of agony, and the second one shut it off abruptly. So abruptly that I knew the man in the wagon box was dead.

I could hear the others now, moving boldly out there in the shadows, daring me to fire again. I rolled toward the hogyard fence. Someone cried out and then the firing drowned all sound and the earth behind me was torn and gouted and slashed with bullets.

I touched the bottom board of the fence and felt the wet, coarse earth against my fingers and smelled the powerful, nitrogenous odor of the hogs. I heard that one moving inside the fence, behind the trough, and I stood up slowly until I found the biggest crack between the horizontal fence boards.

I saw him, ten feet away, standing up behind the trough, looking over the fence, just a faint black shadow against the faintly lighter shadows of the hoghouse and the sky. I aimed at him, but before I could pull the trigger a shadow bulged past the corner of the hoghouse and a voice yelled, "Dan! Sing out, Dan!"

I hesitated a moment. I had my choice of the two of them, the man who'd just yelled for Dan and the man behind the trough. I fired once through the crack between horizontal fence boards at the man down there. A bullet splintered the fence a yard from my face as I jerked the gun around and put two bullets into the middle of the shadow that had come around the corner of the hoghouse. Then I was over the fence and on my hands and knees in the wet, spongy hogyard. I scrambled behind the trough. The man I had shot through the crack in the fence was still breathing when I bent over him, but he died before I felt for and found his gun and extra shells.

They had stopped firing. They were moving around in the shadows, and then, suddenly, I could no longer hear them. When I did hear footsteps again, they seemed to be approaching from the direction of the house.

I saw the first lantern snap on, one of those with a bullseye lens, and I realized that the two men left

alive were going to make sure they stayed that way. The lantern threw a thick yellow beam toward the hogyard. Then another one came on, from the opposite direction. Now they could see me, but I could not see them; I could not see beyond the lanterns at all. Nothing was distinguishable beyond the lanterns, not even as shadows.

I couldn't shoot out a moving, bobbing lantern in one shot, nor two or three, without luck, and they knew it. It was an old trick, making the lanterns bob and weave like that. They'd put them on long limber poles, so that they could hold them high, far out from their bodies. They would simply advance on the hogyard, holding the lights out from them, until they spotted me through the fence, and then it would be all over.

I turned and ran for the hogshed and got my back against it, where at least they would have to come at me from the front on three sides. That was one satisfaction. They couldn't shoot me in the back. I crouched in the foul-smelling mud and rotting hay, and waited for them.

And now, suddenly, there was a third voice out there. Billy McKay's voice.

"So he got all but the two of you!" Billy said harshly.

"What the hell?" one of the men said. "We —"

A heavy shotgun boomed twice. The wall behind me shuddered with the concussion. I felt the painful ringing in my ears and watched the two lanterns arc toward the ground and splinter there.

After the glare of the lanterns, my eyes, in the abrupt blackness, were almost useless. I stood motionless, stunned with the realization that the shotgun blasts had not been meant for me.

"Henry!" Billy McKay called. "Are you all right?" And then, before I could say anything: "Hold your fire, Henry. I've changed my mind." I heard him take a step, and then another. "They're all dead," he said. "I got these last two jaspers myself." He laughed shortly. "You still alive, Henry?"

He must know exactly where I was, I knew. He'd have seen me in the light of the lanterns. He didn't have to trick me into speaking so that he could spot my position.

"I'm alive, Billy," I said, and waited. My eyes were once again becoming accustomed to the darkness; I could make out Billy's shadowy form now, and the almost imperceptible glint of shotgun barrels.

"I got to thinking about us, Henry," Billy said. "I guess I must have gone a little crazy in prison, or I wouldn't have tried this. But when the shooting got started good, it sort of woke me up."

There was a long silence. I didn't move, and — so far as I could tell — neither did Billy.

"Come on out here," he said

finally. "I'm willing to call the score even, if you are."

I didn't want to ask it; I *had* to ask it. "Why'd you kill those men, Billy?" I said.

He chuckled harshly. "It was them or me. They was fixing to kill me, just as soon as they'd had their fun with you." There was a subtle change in his voice. "I was the one who cleaned out the safe on the last job. There was a little chamois bag of diamonds in there with the money, and I sort of forgot to tell them about it. Hell, the stones were worth ten times the money we got, and when the boys found out what'd been in the safe, they got a little riled."

I could no longer see the glint of the shotgun barrels. That could be because he was reloading it, I reflected, and the gun wasn't being held steady enough for me to get a fix on it.

"I overheard them plotting it out earlier this evening," Billy went on. "They would have done it then, I guess, but I'd already told them about the reception I wanted to give you, and they didn't want to miss the fun." He chuckled again. "And besides, I couldn't have taken the whole damn outfit by myself. I figured you'd get maybe one or two of them, and then I'd come up from behind and pick off the rest."

It could be, I thought; *it could be exactly the way he's telling it.* And even if it were not, the fact remained that Billy McKay had stepped in with a shotgun and saved me from certain death at the hands of his own kind. There was something else: the fact that he hadn't used the shotgun on me before he'd used it on his two friends with the lanterns. For that matter, why — unless he really had undergone some inexplicable change of mind — didn't he use the shotgun on me now? It was possible that he couldn't see me at all, that to him I could not be distinguished from the big black mass of the hogshed. But I didn't think so. For some reason of his own, Billy McKay had saved me from two of his men and he was not using the shotgun.

"What's your game, Billy?" I said as quietly as I could, and still have my voice carry the distance to him. "There has to be one. What is it?"

"No game, Henry," he said. "I got to thinking about the time when we were friends, that's all. I stacked that up against what you did to me while I was in the pen, and what I did to you by sending you out here to this party — and all at once I knew the score was even. I thought I wanted you dead, but I was wrong. I wanted you paid back, that's all."

I moistened my lips, straining my eyes into the night. I had not been aware of any sound of movement, but now Billy was not where he had been before; his vague form was no longer a part of the shadows.

"And the pardon, Billy?" I said.

"I turned them over to you, didn't I? All right. We can say they

tumbled and put up a fight, and we had to take them any way we could. We can make it stick, Henry."

I probed the darkness, but I could not see him. "What's our next move?" I said.

"You mean you'll go along with it?"

"I mean I'll talk about it," I told him.

"We'll go in the house," he said. "I reckon Jim will want to be in on this."

And now I could see him again. Or thought I could. I was thinking about what Billy had said, and about the time when we were growing up together. I remembered how it had been with him, and how it had been with me, and the different roads we had traveled.

And I remembered how Billy had hit his brother Jim full in the face with his gun. I stared hard at the dark blob that was Billy's shadow, and I thought, The Billy of my memory is dead. It's as if he never even lived. The man who hit Jim in the face is Billy McKay, not the memory of a childhood friend. One person had used Billy McKay's body for a few years; then that person had died, and now someone else was using it. Someone I didn't know, or could ever know. Someone who had slammed his heavy gun against Jim McKay's face.

It was this man toward whom I raised my gun and fired.

I shot until my gun was empty again, firing rapidly in a pattern that I hoped would find him and trying to think only of the feel of the bucking gun against my palm and the smell of the burned powder. Somewhere between the first and final shot, I heard the shotgun roar, and for an instant Billy McKay's body was distinct in the burst of flame. The charge of buckshot tore through the rotten planking above and to the left of my head.

After the sound and flame of gunfire, the yard seemed more dark and quiet than it had during any previous moment. I moved a few feet to my right, keeping well down, and then slowly and cautiously made my way toward the place where Billy had stood. I kept only one of the guns, and this one I reloaded as I approached the dark form on the ground. I held the gun in one hand, and put the palm of my other hand flat over Billy's heart.

Then Billy spoke, and I jerked my hand away and shoved the gun against his ribs.

"It was all true, Henry," Billy whispered. "About the reason I shot those boys." He coughed, a soft, dry cough like the rustle of dead leaves. "And I did change my mind, Henry. . . Only, I did it because I didn't want you to die so easy. I — I wanted to kill you slow . . . with my bare hands."

A lantern was moving toward us now and I heard Jim McKay's voice calling me. I didn't answer him.

Billy coughed again, and this time the cough was filled with all the

pain of his dying. "I just want you to know that, Henry," he said, so softly I could scarcely hear him. "I want you to know that I meant to kill you . . . with my fists. I'd hate to die knowing you thought I'd turned soft toward you. I . . ." He made another sound in his throat, something like a cough. But it was not a cough. It was the rattle of death in his throat.

I rose and turned and walked toward Jim McKay.

"It's over," I said. "Billy's dead. Billy and the rest of them." I did not look at Jim's face. Neither of us spoke for almost a full minute. Then Jim said, "Henry . . ." His voice sounded as if it was going to break.

"Yes, Jim?"

"Could . . . could you say you never delivered the letter, Henry?"

I looked at his face then, swollen misshapenly on the left side, his left eye almost closed, and dried blood spread like congealed paste over the deep slash made by the gun barrel and front sight.

He turned slowly and looked out in the direction of the hogyard.

"Don't think about it," I said. "And don't worry about — about anything, Jim."

"You mean that?" he asked.

"Hell, yes," I said unsteadily. "Let's get back to town and have your face fixed up. Then we'll —" I started to look around, toward the hogyard, and said, "Are you sure—?"

"They'll be here," he said. "They'll always be here, Henry."

I stood beside Jim while the silence grew between us and the lantern wavered in his trembling fingers.

"I couldn't have delivered the letter, Jim," I said at last. "I had no one to deliver it to, did I?"

He sighed gratefully and rubbed his swollen, closing eyes with his fingertips.

"No," he said. "You didn't, Henry."

Leander was a barber and Greenberry had a magnificent beard. It was a combination destined for fame. . . . .

The

New Calypso was getting to be a real town when Baldpate Frailey settled there. It wasn't tucked away so far in a corner of Nebraska that you couldn't find it on a map if you looked hard enough. On a big map. It bumped out with a fair quota of low buildings and squared-corner roads on each side of the railroad and twice a week a freight train stopped and when the station agent sold a ticket he could set the signals and one of the two-a-day once-each-way passenger trains would squeal to a halt instead of chugging straight through. The local farmers shipped there in harvest season and the local cattlemen too and supplies came in for the whole surrounding countryside. Yes, New Calypso had grown to town-size when Baldpate Frailey stepped off the train with the tools

of his trade in a black leather valise and set up shop in a squat two-room shack between a saloon and a sprawling feedstore.

Baldpate was a barber. Maybe it was peculiar for a man without a hair on his own long thin head to make a living out of other men's head-crops, but he was a fair-to-middling barber who could trim your hair without nicking your ears and scrape away your stubble while leaving most of the skin intact. His shop was on the wrong side of the tracks. Well, wrong side to some people. It was on the side with most of the saloons and the stockyard and the warehouse and the basket mill and the in-and-out squatters' shacks. It wasn't on the side with the saloon that had upstairs rooms to rent and called itself a hotel and the prosperous livery stable and the good retail stores and the solid respectable houses of the solid respectable townsfolk. That side already had a barber shop that had already caught the fancy trade with its neatly painted pole out front and its big mirror behind the two chairs and its shiny brass spittoon that its proprietor called a cuspidor. Baldpate started with a makeshift chair that he could raise and lower with a wooden lever. He finally acquired a real barber-chair secondhand out of Lincoln. He even got a small mirror and a black-painted iron spittoon. But he couldn't compete with the other shop and he didn't try. He got the fringe trade, the men who worked on the same side of the tracks and an occasional cowboy nursing his nickels and trainmen stopping off and the squatters who sometimes could pay and sometimes couldn't. He had to be content with that and he was. He didn't ask much out of life.

When Baldpate stepped off the train he wasn't alone. He had two boys with him, his sons, Leander and Greenberry. Leander was the older, already stretching long and thin in body and head with such a meager scraggly topknot of hair you could tell he wouldn't be wearing a man's pants long before he'd be bald as a bean. He took after his father. Greenberry was a pair of years younger, considerably shorter but plumper with a waving tangle of hair that would have made a fine big floor-mop. He must have taken after his mother, who had quietly checked out of the Frailey family and the whole of this world some years before.

The three of them lived in the back room of the shop. Baldpate did the barbering and Leander did the housekeeping and Greenberry did nothing. Nothing except eat hearty, wander around town with other boys, and sit lazy in the sun, which was what he liked best after the eating. Old Baldpate favored Greenberry, maybe because of that mop of hair, and was always telling Leander to take care of him and watch out for him. So naturally it was Leander not Greenberry who began to be

snapping the shears at the chair in the afternoons when Baldpate grew tired and felt the arthritis creeping into his joints. And then one night, along about the time the boys had their full growth, Baldpate sat up on his cot in the dark and called across the little room. "Leander. You mind me now. You take care of your brother." And old Baldpate lay back down and rolled his head on the pillow and died.

You can forget about Baldpate Frailey now. He's not important to this story. He brought the family to New Calypso and started the family business and told Leander what to do and died and that's enough said about him. It's Leander and Greenberry we're interested in.

Leander first. He was a good boy, quiet and steady, so naturally he became a good man, quiet and steady still. The only thing unusual about his growing stage was the stretch he spent a lot of time drawing pictures with a thick surveyor's pencil he'd found somewhere on any scrap of paper that came to hand. Nobody paid any attention to that. Nobody except Greenberry, who just looked and laughed and settled back to more lazing in the sun. But anyone who paid real attention might have noticed that Leander liked to draw heads, men's heads, with plenty of hair on them and sideburns and all kinds of mustaches and beards. Then he didn't have time for that because he was helping with the barbering as well as doing the housekeeping and then his father was dead and he had fulltime barbering to keep him busy. He didn't need to draw heads after that. He had real ones to work with.

It wasn't long before folks on the wrong side of the tracks knew they had a prize barber there who wouldn't be worrisome about being paid on the dot as long as they brought him heavy manes of hair or thick crops of whiskers to be sheared. They gave him plenty of practice and by the time his techniques were worked out it was a treat to be barbered by that Leander. He'd set you in that one chair and stand back and circle you slowly, studying your head from all around. Then he'd pick up the right tool and go to work. Sometimes it'd be the hand-clippers. He could do a whole handsome haircut with those clippers alone. Sometimes it'd be the heavy shears or again the light scissors or an alternating of them. Whatever it was, there'd be a wonderful snipping rhythm soothing about your ears. Leander had more than rhythm. He had positive melodies matching the work in hand. If your hair was coarse and strong, you'd hear a marching tune from the flying blades as the locks fell. If your hair was light and fluffy, you'd hear something like a delicate dance tune. His combing was right in time and his soft old brush with the powder on it would be dusting dainty about your neck at the exact second the cut tag-ends of hair

might be beginning to get itchy and threatening to slide down under your shirt. And when he'd lower the chair-back and lather your face and take the right razor out of old Baldpate's box that had one marked for each day in the week, then you knew you were in the hands of a master. His razors were always so sharp the toughest whiskers surrendered without a struggle. His strokes were so deft you weren't certain you felt them. When he raised the chair-back again and stepped away and circled you again, you sat still and waited for the verdict. Maybe he'd shake his head and snatch up his scissors and make a fresh attack on your hair or mustache or beard or even eyebrows and by that time you'd not even think of interfering because you knew that when he was finished you'd look better than you ever did before. Let him do it his way and Leander could make anybody look like somebody.

As good as his barbering, some people said, was the effect he had on his customers. He wasn't a talking barber and that marked him as different right away. He was usually so intent on the portrait he was making out of the raw material of features and hair and whiskers in his chair that he might not even hear you if you spoke to him. But if you listened closely you might hear him muttering to himself, not much and not often, just a few words now and then . . . "interesting head to work on" . . . "now these are eyebrows" . . . "no sense hiding that chin" . . . things like that. No matter how low and picayune you felt going into the shop, you had the feeling coming out that maybe the face you presented to the world had a point or two in its favor.

The first the folks on the right side of the tracks began to have some notion what had been developing over on the other side was when Osgood R. Buxton, proprietor of the Big Bargain Mercantile Establishment and president of the New Calypso Bank, was stranded there with a half hour to kill. The day had started bad for him. All through breakfast his wife had complained again about the wide drooping mustache that had taken him years to cultivate into the kind of upper-lip canopy he thought impressive. "Makes you look like a seasick mastiff," she said and was so delighted at her comparison that he stomped out madder than usual. Then he went down to the freight office to check the shipment he was expecting and found it wasn't in and the train would be half an hour late. He stomped up and down the dirt street kicking at the dust and the unfairness of it all hit him so hard he decided to strike back in some drastic way. Through the open door of Leander's shop he saw the barber-chair empty and stomped in and planked himself in it. He took hold of his mustache with both

hands. "Shave this damn thing off," he said.

Leander didn't pay any attention to the words. Leander was padding around him in a circle studying his head from all sides. Buxton slapped both hands on the chair arms. "You hear me?" he shouted. "I said shave this damn cookie-duster off me!"

Leander focussed on him as someone speaking. "No," Leander said. "It belongs there."

Buxton subsided with a blowing gurgle that waggled the mustache. "Belongs there?"

"Yes," Leander said. "It just needs a little pointing so it won't fight with your forehead."

"Fight with my forehead?" Buxton said in a small voice. He relaxed in the chair and a big piece of checkered cloth covered him up to the neck and was tied behind and a clipping rhythm began to play about his head and something like a cheery marching tune tickled his ears. When the cloth came off he stood up and peered into the little mirror. His hair had been thinned along the sides so suddenly it seemed thicker on top. His eyebrows had acquired a faintly quizzical air. His mustache was almost the same yet remarkably different. It had a slight upward twist suggestive of jauntiness without being aggressive and the sidetips somehow pointed your glance upward to notice the broad forehead. The whole effect was that of a man who could do things in the world and was of consequence in his community. When he walked out the door Buxton was snapping his knees in long strides and though the train was another half hour late he spent the time chatting cheerfully with the station agent and trying to catch the light right so he could see his reflection in a window.

With a beginning like that and a booster like Buxton only a few months were needed for Leander to have a steady clientele from the right side of the tracks. There were those who remained faithful to the other shop and that was sensible because even Leander couldn't have kept the entire masculine quotient of New Calypso in trim. But he had all the trade he could handle, fancy and fringe, and it was all the same to him. A customer was a customer regardless of where he lived or how full or empty his pocket. Leander would do as artistic a job on a stray tramp as on Osgood R. Buxton himself. He stayed right on in the same one-chair shop and made only the one change of buying a bigger mirror. New Calypso became real proud of him and Gus Hagelin who ran the New Calypsan Herald-Gazette ran items about his shop once in a while and kept notes on some of the stories about him to be included some day in a history of the township.

You've probably never heard the one about the hair-cutting contest with Polkadot City's best entry. New Calypsans rarely talked about that one. Some of them got to

blowing boastful over Polkadot City way about Leander's speed with the shears, which was silly because speed with Leander was just a part of his skill and not a purpose in itself. But anyway that started an argument and the upshot was that the New Calypsans bet that Leander could trim down two shaggy heads before the best barber Polkadot City could find could finish one. The bets were heavy before Leander heard about it. He didn't like it but he couldn't let any of his regulars lose money on him by default so he said he'd make the race. They thought he ought to go into training, practice finger exercises and things like that, but he just said to tell him when and went on with his regular barbering. When they came for him on the day he just picked up his clippers and a comb and dropped them in a pocket and went along. They had three men lined up on kitchen chairs and those were really shaggy-headed. The other barber had a tray ready with half a dozen pairs of scissors laid out. Leander shrugged his shoulders and took out his own old clippers and waited. At the start-off gun the two of them went at it and it was Leander's race all the way. While the other barber clacked his shears and tangled himself in the hair and nipped his own fingers in his hurry, Leander skimmed along, swift and sure, and a fine racing fast jigtime tune played around the two heads he was working on, first one and then the other. There wasn't any waste motion. Each cut was exact and true. He was carving out neat hair-cuts with his clippers like a sculptor chipping a statue. He was going strong and about finished when the inevitable happened. He started muttering to himself. He had the two heads trimmed in a way that would have made any ordinary barber proud when he stepped back and made a circuit of his two men and shook his head. He didn't even hear the shoutings of his supporters and he stepped close again and started the final little delicate polishing strokes that would bring out the best barbered points of those two men. While the New Calypsans groaned the other barber made a last jagged slice and claimed a finish and considerable argument developed but the judges gave him the decision. And Leander wasn't even aware of the argument. He was quietly padding around his two subjects and nodding satisfied to himself. The New Calypsans paid their bets grumbling and in time most of them conceded that Leander couldn't have done anything else and still been Leander but they never talked much about that contest. They preferred telling the stories like the one about the time the Governor was worried over re-election and as a campaign stunt came all the way to New Calypso for some of Leander's barbering and Leander touched him up so noble and convincing that he won with a thumping majority. But

you've heard that one. Everybody has.

It's Greenberry's turn now. Just as Leander kept on the way he had started, growing longer and thinner and balder and more energetic, so Greenberry kept on the way he had started too, growing plumper so that he seemed shorter, and thicker-haired and lazier. He sprouted whiskers at a remarkably early age and they weren't sparse and blond like Leander's which had to be shaved off because they were such poor specimens. No, Greenberry's whiskers were stout and dark and close-sprouting and he showed prodigious power in producing them. By time he was old enough to vote, if he'd ever bother to do anything taking that much energy, he had the biggest, bushiest beard in New Calypso. And it kept right on growing. No razor, not even a pair of scissors, had ever touched the main body of it. The only clipping he gave it was a mere minor pruning around the mouth to keep the way clear for his frequent intake of food. It roamed around his face from ear to ear and down over his chest like a magnificent stand of underbrush and merged above into his dark waving hair-crop so that his upper cheeks and eyes and forehead peeped out like someone hiding in a thicket. Maybe he clung to that wondrous beard because he realized it represented his one real accomplishment. Some back-biting folks said he did it because he was mean and worthless and was trying to shame his brother and in a figurative sense thumb his nose at the very family business that enabled him to stay so plump and well-fed. That couldn't have been true. Greenberry Frailey wasn't mean. Maybe close to worthless. But not mean. He was just lazy. He was just trifling. Matter of fact, he was as proud of Leander as anyone in New Calypso and if arguing hadn't been too much trouble he'd have been ready to argue with anyone that Leander was the best brother and best barber in the country.

All the same it was peculiar to see the most amazing crop of hair and whiskers anywhere in civilized captivity sitting day after day in the sun on the little porch of a barber shop. That was what Greenberry did every day the sun shone. Nobody ever knew whether he would have tried to do any barbering if the shop had had another chair. Probably not, because Leander hinted about getting another one once and Greenberry promptly pointed out there wasn't room enough. So Greenberry took over the chore of meals which was somewhat to his liking and after breakfast he'd settle on the porch till time for his midmorning snack and then settle again till time for lunch and after that settle again till time for his midafternoon jaunt all the way next door to the neighboring saloon. Just before this last he'd go into the shop and around Leander by the chair

and pull open the money-drawer under the scissors-shelf and slip into his pocket one dollar, never any more and never any less. When that dollar was in the hands of the bartender he would come back for the evening meal. If his taste had been for the good liquor at a quarter a shot, he'd still be able to navigate among the dishes and play a fair game of backgammon with Leander after supper. If it had been for the cheap liquor at ten cents a shot, he'd likely soon be snoring on his cot and Leander would have to be the cook. Those times Leander might begin to worry he wasn't doing right by his brother and shake him awake and try telling him he ought to get a job of some kind and Greenberry would simply say: "Why? We're doing all right, aren't we?" and Leander wouldn't know what to say because they were.

There they were, Leander doing his barber's magic inside the shop and Greenberry raising whiskers on the porch and they might have continued that way indefinitely if Leander hadn't acquired an obsession that started as a small notion and grew until it was so bad it could quiver in his fingertips. He had all his regular patrons in the New Calypso territory well in hand, each fitted with the hair-styles and whiskery facial adornments or lack of same that would make the emphatic most of their natural endowments. The task now was simply to keep them trimmed that way. There was no challenge left in them, no demand for fresh creative effort. He welcomed stray strangers who wandered in with positive delight. But they were few and long between. He began to feel frustrated and barren of inspiration. And then he stood on the little porch one afternoon and looked at Greenberry snoozing in the sun and a breeze waggled the long soft ends of Greenberry's beard and the small notion was born. By evening it was so big in him that he could hardly look at Greenberry across the supper table. During the next days it swelled to such proportions that it interfered with his barbering. He had to shake his head sharp to rid it of the image of that magnificent shock of raw material and the rhythmic melody of his cutting would break as his fingers quivered on the clippers. And then Greenberry all unknowing tripped the trigger of the trap awaiting him by taking on ten shots and coming home and falling asleep.

Leander closed the shop door at five o'clock as usual and padded into the back room and saw Greenberry gently snoring, and a sudden little tremor ran through him. He rocked on his feet a moment and closed his mouth with a sudden snap. He padded into the shop and returned and laid out his tools on a chair by the cot, the clippers and the scissors, big and small, and a comb and the right razor and the brush and the soap-mug. Carefully he raised Greenberry's shoulders with one arm and

slipped two pillows behind them. Carefully he spread the checkered cloth over Greenberry's plump middle and raised Greenberry's beard to slide the upper edge of the cloth under it. For a long time he stood staring at the huge thatch of wondrous hair and whiskers framed against the cloth and the top pillow. He was not studying the head because he did not need to. He knew every possible configuration hidden inside that thicket, every feature that everyone else in New Calypso had long forgotten. He was tasting the sweet tangy ecstasy of anticipation. At last he carefully set another chair by the cot-side and sat down on it and leaned forward. With a soft sigh of complete contentment he picked up the clippers and went to work.

Greenberry stirred once at a slight tugging on his chin but a rich majestic melody of snipping blades was playing about his head and it soothed him even deeper into slumber. He woke late in the evening in the lamplight and was surprised that Leander had not roused him to supper. He was more surprised when he saw Leander limp on the other cot; asleep and on his long thin bald-topped face the beatific smile of a man who has made a supreme effort and found it good. Greenberry heaved to his feet and was so befuddled he was not aware that he was a changed man. Out of sheer habit he ate five big sandwiches and did not notice the new freedom of access to his mouth and lay down again and slept once more. He was still unaware in the morning despite the secretive proud glances Leander gave him and awareness did not touch him until he went out the back door and took hold of the two-wheeled pushcart there and started off on his weekly food-shopping jaunt to Oscar Trittipoe's General Grocery Store.

He never reached the store. Not on that trip. He was accustomed to being ignored by most people passing and that pleased him because it saved the energy of a return greeting. He was accustomed to having those who did speak make humorous references to his beard. But this time neither thing happened. Everyone noticed him. Very definitely. They stared at him as if they had never seen him before and turned to watch him go by. And no one spoke about his beard. No one spoke at all. Most of them nodded to him, respectful and deferential, and some of the men involuntarily tipped their hats. It was too much for Greenberry's somnolent mind to grasp all at once. He hurried back to the shop and in and turned to Leander puttering at his instrument shelf, and in the turning saw himself in the big mirror.

Not himself. Someone else. A man of amazingly impressive presence. A thick shock of hair tamed and disciplined to dignity yet with the inherent vitality plain in every faultless wave. Strong eyebrows sub-

tly arched to emphasize the width and nobility of the brow. A sturdy mustache, firm and short-cropped, speaking of confidence and self-assurance in itself and somehow also pointing out the outthrust power of the nose above. Rugged sideburns clipped close, yet with a faint flaring that suggested breadth of mind. And a beard, deep under the chin and reliable, short but not too short, wide but not too wide, a solid foundation for the face proclaiming serenity and wisdom with every sturdy hair.

Greenberry shook with the shock. He threw Leander one look of frenzied reproach and fairly ran into the back room and closed the door. He sat on the edge of his cot and leaned the superb portrait that was now his head forward into his plump hands and let the frightening knowledge that he was marked with distinction sweep over him. It was characteristic that he never once thought that a few strokes with scissors could reduce him again to a scraggly nonentity. He would have had to make those scissor strokes. He sat motionless a long time. At last his head rose and he made a few exploratory motions with his hands around his chin and cheeks. He stood up and placed himself in front of the little mirror that had once served in the shop and his mind was braced now for what he would see. He studied himself, turning his head sideways and rolling his eyes to catch the splendor from various angles. Unconsciously he stood straighter and pulled in his bulging waistline and puffed out his chest. By noontime the new Greenberry Frailey, fortified with a full lunch, was ready to face the world.

The new Greenberry Frailey. That is precisely what he was. A new man. A changed man. In all outward semblance at least. The very first day he discovered what his impressive appearance could accomplish in promoting prompt, actually scurrying, service, and the choicest cuts of meat, from the formerly lackadaisical and almost contemptuous Oscar Trittipoe. On the third day he learned the ease with which he could obtain virtually unlimited credit at the Big Bargain Mercantile Establishment and forthwith arrayed himself in what was to be thereafter his unvarying uniform, black trousers and black frock coat and gorgeous grey vest and white shirt and celluloid collar and black-string bow-tie unseen beneath that now disciplined matchless beard except when he thrust his chin outward and fluffed the beard up in a gesture calculated to draw attention to its perfect proportions. By the end of the first week he had even acquired a gold-headed cane and his voice had dropped several notes to a deepening resonance, and he was developing a flowing, almost courtly, manner. By the end of the second week he was settled in his new role, rapidly becoming another New Calypsan in-

stitution, a monumental figure seen every clear day on the center bench between the town watering trough and the town flagpole across from the post office. You can assay the true measure of Leander's art when you understand that already the New Calypsans were forgetting the old Greenberry who sat in his ancient red-plaid shirt and split-seam dungarees on the porch of the little shop and were drifting so completely under the spell of the new Greenberry that they accepted his benign nods as benedictions and felt that their town was a better place because such a towering testament to the dignity and nobility of the human race dwelt among them. When he had snoozed on the shop porch he had been a shiftless disgrace to be ignored. Now, when he drowsed on the bench, serene and nodding in the sun, he was a philosopher thinking deep thoughts and pondering grave problems and giving tone to the community. Why, it's a fact there was not even a noticeable chuckle when he began calling himself J. Greenberry Frailey.

It was Osgood R. Buxton himself who launched Greenberry on his public career. The time came when Buxton was a mite worried about the New Calypso Bank. More than a mite worried. The bank had overreached itself in granting loans and the cattle market was wobbly and a lot of the loans might have to be carried over and a few rumors got to skipping about. Buxton was worried what would happen if a run started. He sat at his desk by the bank's front window worrying and stroking the mustache Leander had saved for him, and out the window he noticed with a sudden idea-prompted push the never-failing impressiveness of Greenberry on the bench. Five minutes and a brief talk later Buxton was on his way to Gus Hagelin with an item for the Herald-Gazette to the effect that J. Greenberry Frailey had kindly consented to become a director of the New Calypso Bank. The only immediate change for Greenberry was the addition of ten dollars a month to his pocket and a slight shift of sitting quarters, from the bench by the flagpole to a bench in front of the bank where the sun was even better and his presence was a steady reassurance to troubled depositors. The monthly meetings were no real chore. All he had to do was attend and sit quiet and murmur "hmmmm" in a thoughtful tone when an important decision was posed and the other directors would proceed exactly as they would have done without him, buttressed now with the feeling that they were being wise and judicious indeed. But this first gesture into the realm of actual activity encouraged other people to draw him into other things. He discovered the lure of speech-making. The deep roll of his voice combined with the overpowering benignity of his appearance to produce an hypnotic effect on his

audiences. The words were unimportant. It was the impression that prevailed. He auctioned the box lunches at town dances and could obtain good prices for those prepared by the most unattractive, unattached females. He presided at the annual Strawberry Festival and the Stockmen's Show and was the Fourth of July orator. There was no doubt about it. With little real effort on his part he had become an unofficial public functionary.

And Leander? Well, Leander was content. He had done what old Baldpate told him to do. He had taken care of Greenberry in the most important way and what remained of the taking care was merely a matter of helping to maintain Greenberry in the style to which he had become accustomed. That was simple because Greenberry was not active enough to wear out clothes rapidly, ate, if anything, less than before, and his drinks were almost invariably supplied by admirers more than willing to pay for the privilege. Leander now had constantly before him the inspiration of his finest masterpiece, the one perfect portrait that he never tired of retouching and keeping in perfect trim. And Greenberry, in his way, was properly grateful. His innocent trust that Leander would take care of him had been justified in a surprising and superlative degree. He never failed, when extolling the glories of New Calypso in his occasional orations, to include some mention of the tonsorial wizardry of that far-famed prince among barbers, my brother Leander. He continued to grace the little shop with his presence, eating and sleeping there. He continued to spend his spare evenings playing backgammon with Leander. So complete was his hold on the town that many people regarded this as somewhat of a condescension on his part.

Yes, Leander had worked out a way of life for himself and Greenberry that satisfied them both and was a double-weight asset to New Calypso. Then entered the serpent, Worthington P. C. Stimmel. That was the name in Old English lettering on his calling cards, and he carried his cards in a cardcase. They also stated, in smaller but no less compelling type, that he was President and Corresponding Secretary of the Amalgamated Association for the Betterment of American Communities. This Stimmel had long since made an interesting discovery. He had learned that when towns attained some size they found themselves needing such modern improvements as sewers and cobblestone pavements and those ingenious means of public transportation, horse-cars. He had discovered that sometimes the people of an ambitious small town could be persuaded that the process would work in reverse, that if they would sell bonds to themselves to raise the funds and draw plans for new streets and install sewers and pavements and horse-

cars, then their town would automatically attract newcomers and grow swiftly and become boomingly prosperous. It was unfortunate that the promotional expenses and the cost of this Stimmel's invaluable services always approximated most if not all of the funds raised. But by the time the townsfolk learned that in full, eye-opening force, this Stimmel would be far away planning the improvement of another community in another part of the country.

A man of Worthington P. C. Stimmel's experienced discernment could see at once the splendid future that awaited New Calypso. He could recognize with equal facility the unusual opportunity offered by J. Greenberry Frailey's bewhiskered magnificence. He had not been in New Calypso ten days before stationery was printed and bonds were being engraved and both stationery and bonds proclaimed the fact that J. Greenberry Frailey was chairman of the New Calypso Progressive Citizen's League, the latest chapter of the A.A.B.A. There was some opposition, led by Oscar Trittipoe, who was by nature an obstinate individual, and Gus Hagelin, who had acquired from his newspaper work a suspicious trend of mind and some knowledge of human frailties. But obstinacy and suspicion could not prevail against the majesty of the Greenberry whiskers. The N.C.P.C. League gained momentum and the date was set for the public meeting that would launch the bond sale.

All this bothered Leander not at all. He never interfered in Greenberry's doings. His own doubts about the League project were overwhelmed by Greenberry's contagious optimism. To him the thought of a bigger and more booming New Calypso was pleasant because that might mean new and unfamiliar customers. He went quietly on with his barbering. And then Worthington P. C. Stimmel made a mistake. Operating on the principle of, when in Rome, doing what the Romans do, he went into the little shop for a hair trim.

"Heard about you from your brother," this Stimmel said in his best patronizing manner. There was no reply. Leander was circling the chair, studying him from all sides. The first eager small smile on Leander's face was fading into a tight-lipped frown. Mutton-chop whiskers. Leander had never liked mutton-chop whiskers and refused to permit them on any regular customer. They were not right for any decent human head. They could have only one purpose, to hide or draw attention away from other things. Correct. These mutton-chops gave a broadness and solidity to this head that was not really there. They obscured the whole sinister, greedy, calculating cast of the countenance. Leander picked up his big scissors and they hovered about Stimmel's head and the rhythmic tune they played in their first warming-up skirmishes in the air

was a stern and resolute one. But they never touched a hair or whisker. Leander stopped and laid them down. He could not do it. He picked up the small scissors and for the first time since he was a boy relieving old Baldpate in the afternoons he gave an ordinary haircut, merely trimming into neatness the original portrait presented to him.

That was all that happened then in the shop. But afterwards Leander did what he had never done before. He closed the shop during working hours and went to see Gus Hagelin and what he learned there added more worry to what he had learned in the shop and he tried to talk to several League members and they laughed and told him to stick to his barbering and he tried to talk to Greenberry that evening and Greenberry laughed too and at last grew huffy and said he'd move to a room at the hotel if Leander didn't stop harping on something he knew nothing about. So Leander kept his worry to himself and it grew till it was a new obsession in him and he kept remembering what old Baldpate had said and realizing that Greenberry was in this slick Stimmel scheme and in a sense the kingpin of it, the asset that could push it through. And so at last, when he had worried himself thinner and the time was short, he did something else he had never done before. On the day before the public meeting he went to the saloon next door and bought a bottle of the cheap liquor and had it on the table when he played backgammon with Greenberry that evening. He poured more into Greenberry's glass whenever that was empty and his own slick scheme succeeded. By eleven o'clock Greenberry was snoring soundly on his cot. Leander padded forward into the shop and returned and laid out his tools on a chair and spread the checkered cloth over Greenberry's chest. For a long time he stood staring down at the finest portrait he had ever achieved. With a soft sigh of torment he picked up his clippers and a slow sad melody of snipping blades began to play around Greenberry's head.

Greenberry slept straight through the night and well into the morning. He woke slowly and then focussed suddenly on the old clock on a shelf. Five minutes past ten. The meeting had begun five minutes ago and he was not there. No time even for breakfast and that was a drastic thing to happen to him. He shrugged as quickly as he could into his frock-coat and grabbed his gold-headed cane and hurried out through the shop past Leander sitting mournful in his own barber-chair. He hurried out the front door disregarding Leander's calling to him and hurried up the street and across the tracks and to the crowded space behind the flagpole where a bandstand had been erected and the four-piece New Calypso band was seated and Worthington P. C. Stimmel was standing erect delivering his practiced spiel.

There on the stand this Stimmel, talking against time, saw with relief the magnificent wavy shock of Greenberry's hair moving towards him through the assembled people. He shifted smoothly into remarks introducing that peerless pillar of New Calypsan community life, J. Greenberry Frailey, and waved to the approaching pillar to ascend the stand. And Greenberry burst out of the crowd and went up the steps and took his dignified stance and thrust his head forward a bit and reached up in the strange hushed silence to fluff his beard.

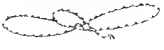
It was that gesture that released the loud and contagious guffaws. There was no beard for Greenberry to fluff. There was only the ridiculously small, round, little-boyish, dimpled chin that the beard had hidden. As the laughter rolled around the flagpole and New Calypsans thumped each other on the back, Worthington P. C. Stimmel, slipped down from the stand and away and Gus Hagelin leaped up on the stand and shouted at the band and raucous music began to blare. And through the merriment came a long thin bald-headed figure, sad and ashamed, to take care of his brother and lead him home.

All the rest of the day the little shop was closed. The next day a plump figure in a red-plaid shirt and split-seam dungarees sat on the little porch in the sun. But inside there was only the plain pedestrian plodding of routine cutting. Greenberry sat in the sun and Leander went on with his barbering inside. But it was an ordinary barber's barbering. He had used his art to destroy and not to create and the magic was gone from his fingers.

In mid-afternoon Greenberry rose and went into the shop and pulled open the money-drawer and took out a dollar and plodded out. He returned barely able to navigate and in a few moments was sleeping and one would have said that was all he was doing.

But he was doing something else. Leander saw it when he came into the back room to prepare some supper. He saw the dark stubble and remembered Greenberry's prodigious talent for raising whiskers. His eyes brightened and small rhythmic melodies began to stir again in his finger-muscles. He had not failed old Baldpate. Not yet. He could try again and, if necessary, again. It would not take long, not with Greenberry so obligingly concentrating even in his sleep on that one wondrous accomplishment.

Already Leander could begin to see the next portrait. Not dignity and thoughtfulness and deep wisdom this time. No. A portrait built around a short, stubby, square-cut beard, the beard of a man steady and dependable and competent at whatever work he might have in hand.



Ex-convicts aren't allowed to carry guns. Dode thought about that as he put the Colt in his pocket.

BY NELSON NYE

Homecoming

THE cold twilight was settling into a colder dusk when Dode Rogers came out of the cedar brakes and got his first look at the town's sprawling outskirts.

It had grown, that was plain. He'd used to hunt turkeys along the flank of these bottoms; and over yonder, there at the edge of that fenced dooryard, was where he had dropped his first white-tailed buck. Five years ago that had been, he thought bitterly. Before the Golden Ingot's owner had noticed Tara Lord.

It was plain enough now that, once Buckner had made up his mind he wanted her, he'd written Dode off as a removable obstacle. In the same casual way he'd slap aside a bothersome horse fly.

A big man, Buckner.

Dode put his horse into the road and its hoofs plopped up a tired clatter of sound that was snatched away, like its dust, by the fangs of the gale.

Lamps shone from scattered small holdings and some kid with a stick ran along a picket fence, and two or three times charging dogs tore out and barked at the gelding's heels.

A few stars broke through the night's increasing blackness. They looked far off and cold, and the growling of Dode's stomach reminded him he hadn't eaten in a pile of weary hours.

He passed a trio of jogging ranch hands rendering an off-key ballad, warm and snug in sheepskin jackets. He took a turn to the right and then a sharp one to the left and wondered if Chris Stegner still ran the Lone Star livery.

He was on Clark now with the town's noises all about him. People tramped the scarred plank walks, ears protected by turned-up coat collars, hands warm-thrust in pockets. "Damn cold night," he heard someone say; and an opening door whipped a woman's laughing voice across the squall of the wind. The washed-thin denim of his pants flapped round his shanks.

He was chilled clear through for all his prison toughness, but he reckoned a large part of it was probably in his head. Lights spilled out of windows up and down the length of Main, and the stamp of booted feet came with a fiddle's teased-high wailing from one of the dives off Whisky Row — Brannaman's, he guessed likely.

He sat a moment irresolute when he came to the next intersection. The Lords lived off yonder in the night's cold-rattling blackness three blocks to the left, where the proximity of stock pens was too pungent for elegant noses. Straight ahead was

the Lone Star livery, the open maw of its runway feebly disclosed by the slanting shafts of the solitary lantern.

Dode, shivering uncontrollably in the wind's raw breath, stayed on Clark, reminding himself a man's horse came first. And he needed to wash some of this trail grime off him and get the stubble scraped from his cheeks before banging his knuckles on Lord's unpainted door. Needed to fill his gut, too. But he knew these for desperate makeshifts. He was afraid to go over there. Scared of what he might read in Tara's eyes.

Swearing under his breath, he put the horse up the lane. Its hoofs made a hollow pounding on the floor. Dode got stiffly out of the saddle and the office door creaked open, spilling out a flood of light. Chris Stegner's shape stood blackly in it. Dode pulled his face up and waited.

The wait lengthened. Then the man said gruffly: "Figurin' to be here a spell or just stoppin' overnight?"

This was Chris Stegner that Dode had known all his life.

Dode rasped a bitter taste around his mouth with his tongue and wished for a better look at him. But the light from the office was too bright for him to see much. He started to put out a hand, let it drop and said, "It's Rogers, Chris — Dode Rogers."

Chris said, "I'm not yet blind, mister. I asked how long you're fixin' to stay. We're pretty crowded right now . . ."

His talk fell away before the look in Dode's eyes.

Dode picked up his reins and got back into the saddle. The gelding whickered a tired little protest but Dode rode him into the blustery night. "Never mind," he said, "there's other stables in this town."

Dode was a levi-legged man in a faded brush jacket, with a spatter of dust streaked across granite features. When they'd first turned him loose with a few dollars in his pocket he'd found it good to be out with a fresh start waiting yonder, and he'd thought he'd never worry about a goddam thing again. But five days on the trail, five long days out of Yuma, and the first great lift was gone, scratched away by the remembrance of those last six months of silence. Not that he was ready yet to feel real doubt of Tara; still it was queer, no getting around it, the way her letters had suddenly quit.

Tara, he could picture her now. Tall for a girl and lithe as a willow switch she'd been the day they said goodbye and she had told him she'd be waiting.

She hadn't cried all through the trial and she had done no crying on that day, and the grip of her hand was warm and strong. There had been no chance to give him her lips — not with Dawks and his rough-talking deputies crowding

Dode into that coach like a leper, and Buckner hanging back, coolly waiting to see the last of him.

It hadn't occurred to him then to question the great man's interest. Buckner was richer than Croesus — owned the Golden Ingot — and was damn near old enough to be the girl's father. It hadn't entered Dode's mind that a feller in his boots would hunger for a girl pledged to marry a stage driver. It had taken some while for Dode to get his eyes open, but Tara's letters had finally done it. Increasing references to 'Jim' and the man's astounding goodness . . .

Dode couldn't remember Tara laughing. His black thoughts had kept pace with the miles, prowling like banshees through the pictures of the past. She hadn't been the laughing kind, with her old man drunk two-thirds of the time and that cub of a brother always half a shake smarter than God Almighty. Self-contained was the tag for Tara with her grave topaz eyes and that burnt-honey hair. . . .

He had to push those thoughts away from him. He'd found three years could seem like forever. Five years for armed robbery was what they'd put in the book, but he'd only served three when they opened the gate, and he wondered if Buckner knew about that.

Probably didn't matter whether he did or he didn't. There wasn't any way that Dode could get at him. An open-and-shut case had been everyone's verdict when the judge handed down the sentence. The jury'd brought in a true bill against Dode, not so much on actual evidence as on the lack of it. Even Dode hadn't suspected what had actually happened until Tara's letters had begun to wake him up, and even then he hadn't believed it. He had thought, by God, he was crazy until Tara's letters had quit coming.

Buckner had played his hand mighty well. It was him who had rescued Tara's pride by giving her the chance she had always wanted. After Dode's departure things had gone from bad to worse with the Lords, and the prospect of living off charity had practically been standing with one foot in the door when James Buckner had reached down his fine helping hand.

He had tried helping out the old man first off — got him three-four jobs hand-running, but the bottle had managed to outlast them all. Then he'd discovered Tara's talent for sewing; found out she made her own clothes and set her up in a dress and bonnets business which, through her own efforts, had been able to encompass her wild brother's didos and keep the old man off the town.

That had been the start of it. Just a loan, he'd told her, to be paid back out of her profits. But Dode had read his intentions between the lines of Tara's letters and saw how the big man's interest had been extended through the town by virtue

of the notes he held on various small-time enterprises.

The butcher's wife had been the first real lady to patronize Tara's talents. She was, her husband allowed, uncommon well pleased. A couple weeks later Mrs. Algy Fitzjoy had come bustling in, all of a lather to get into a new outfit. Mrs. Fitzjoy was the wife of the baker and, when the rest of the town observed her new wardrobe, feminine vanity put its shoulder to the wheel. But the real top was put on it by the visit of Mrs. Potter. T. Jenkins Potter owned the First National, which gave his wife a right to dictate local destiny. She'd given Tara a bid to the Friday Afternoon Club and thereafter Tara went increasingly to affairs at which, strangely enough, Mr. James Buckner also chanced to be present.

Dode didn't really believe her head had been turned, but there was no denying she found her present situation pleasant. She wrote a deal about the fascinating pattern of these nabobs' lives, the 'treasures' they'd collected, the grandfather clock in Mrs. Petron's parlor, the framed oil paintings she had seen at Odie Benoit's. And always some reference to Buckner. . . .

Dode found a new place called the Copper State Feed. Several men, bundled up, stood working their jaws in front of the door hole, and off to the side a red-faced man in a mackinaw was blasphemously unharnessing a team of impatient bays. He glanced over at Dode and said, "Put him inside. I'll git at him in a minute — Whoa, goddam it! Now *stand* there."

Dode said, "My name is Rogers."

"Mine's Cross. Damn lousy weather!" He got the team out of the traces and was starting to lead them into the barn when Dode called loud enough for all to hear, "You might not care for my business, friend. I just got in from three years at Yuma."

The stableman snorted. "I never blame a horse for what he has to carry. Fetch him in the barn, man. He'll be here when you want him."

Dode got down and led the gelding in. He was turning away when Cross called over a shoulder, "There's a coat inside I ain't usin' if you want it."

With his numbed hands beginning to tingle Dode stepped into the warmth and good smells of a café. The place wasn't crowded but it was doing a business. He hung the borrowed sheepskin on a nail and sat at the counter. He didn't know any of these people in here. He made a good meal of steak smothered in onions and topped it with two thick slabs of pie and swilled down a third cup of coffee. Paying his bill, he got into his coat and finally asked the fellow if the Lords still lived on Toole.

"Yeah. Miz' Tara Lord an' her brother — when he's around. Ol' man went to a better place."

"You mean he's . . . dead?"

"That's right."

Dode pushed out into the whip of the wind, hearing the door slam back of him. So this was why Tara's letters had quit coming. With the old man gone and Dode out of the way and no kin around but that loud-mouthed brother, Buckner would have lost no time buttering up to her. In her situation she had needed someone to turn to and the Golden Ingot's owner had been Johnny-on-the-spot.

Dode's mirthless grin was a pinched, white grimace. He wheeled around, forgetting his trail grime and beard-stubbled cheeks. *A man better face things*, he told himself bleakly, and was about to strike out in the direction of Toole when someone came off the covered porch of the Benson House, stepped into the road, and came angling toward him.

A nerve commenced jerking in the side of Dode's face. No mistaking that shape. He felt the loneliest man in this town at that moment.

There was plenty of light from both sides of the street and he could see the wink of metal on the man's flapping coat as the fellow ripped it open so the weight on his hip could ride free to his hand.

Larry Dawks this was, the town's kill-hungry marshal, who had taken Dode into custody and delivered him to Yuma when he'd refused to take the chances Dawks had deliberately thrown in his way.

"You got a gun on you, Rogers?"

Dode told himself fiercely not to rile this damn louse, to play the hand cagey and keep a hold on his temper. But this hardcase approach on top of everything else was too much, and he said thickly: "It's a free country, isn't it?"

He saw the wicked glint crowd into the marshal's stare. The man took another forward step to get the weight just right for drawing, and his cold-jawed face cracked away from his teeth. "Paroled convicts don't pack guns in my town. Get them paws up!"

Dode stood braced for a second, then put his arms above his head.

The marshal patted him over and stepped back, looking disappointed. "You're gettin' smart. You better stay that way." He stared at Dode a moment and said, "This town's got no use for jailbirds. That clear or you want a map to go with it?"

It wasn't anything you could put a hand on. But Dode, watching Dawks with the outrage building like gas pressure in him, was suddenly reminded of a thing he'd all but forgotten. This fellow, who fancied himself another Wyatt Earp, had got that tin pinned on him through the influence of big James Buckner.

"You can't put me out of this town as things stand, but you can sure as hell make me wish I'd gotten out. Is that the notion you're tryin' to ram down my throat, Larry?"

"Just one thing more," Dawks said, spider quiet. "You lay hand

on a smokepole or get in any trouble and I'll put you back in Yuma for the rest of your natural."

It wasn't the wind that made Dode shake as he stood there watching Dawks stride up the street. His blood was too hot to notice the cold. With the roar and the surge of it churning his guts, the last little link snapped neatly into place, and he saw the whole pattern of the frame they'd hung on him.

Buckner, the day Dode's whole world had gone wrong, had been to see Jackson of Arizona Stage Lines, declaring he'd decided to switch dates again. Buckner's mine was up at Goldfield and he'd been getting out the ingots without trouble, casting them too heavy for horsemen to carry off. But he couldn't protect cash that way; he had lost four payrolls out of ten in as many months. He'd give the Company one more chance he said; if they didn't get it through this time he'd have to make other arrangements.

Jackson had admitted the situation was bad. He'd lost a couple guards and wasn't pleased about it either.

During the trial it had been brought out that Buckner then had declared it was the use of guards that tipped the outlaws off. "Don't put any guard on this shipment," he'd said. "They won't be looking for a payroll to be going through this early and, with a good man handling the ribbons, we may bull it through if they do catch on. Use that fellow that's got the west swing through Globe."

"You mean Rogers?"

"That's the one. He's got more guts than you could hang on a fencepost. Pay him double for the run and tell him not to stop for nobody. I'll make good any fares you lose."

And that was howcome Dode had landed in Yuma. He could see it all now. It added up. Every bit of it. Dawks, according to what he'd said at the trial, had inspected the payroll box himself and stowed it in the boot while the coach was still in the barn. Between the bank and the coach it hadn't been out of his hands and it had left the bank stuffed cram full of greenbacks. When Buckner's mine superintendent had taken it off Dode's coach at Goldfield under armed escort, all the box contained was three wadded-up copies of the Globe *Daily Chronicle.*

On the twenty-mile run Dode had stopped just once, to pick up an old lady. Which he'd figured safe enough, but which, at the trial, had additionally damned him. He had let her off, as he'd told them, by a giant cottonwood fronting the buildings of a ranch property about two miles below Goldfield. No one had held him up or made any attempt to do so, but the old lady hadn't come forward and the ranch, he was told, where he claimed to have dropped her off, was the Trig Spaulding place which had been vacant the best part of a year. So

they said he'd really stopped to unload the cash.

Slick, and simple as taking candy from a kid. But all that was in the past now. It was the present he had to cope with. And he reckoned that with his eyes open . . .

To keep the things he loves a man has to be willing to fight for them. With this conviction in the front of his mind, Dode turned in at the Lord place and, setting his jaw, grimly knocked on the door. At least she wasn't married yet.

Far back in the house he could see the shine of a lamp. Then the margin of light presently broadened and he heard the light tap of shod feet approaching. He saw a dim shape beyond the glass of the door, and Tara's voice called, a little sharply, he thought: "Who is it?"

"Me —" he said, seeing his breath plume out against the light from within. "Dode Rogers."

She went completely still. She stood there, seeming to look forever through the glass, before she pulled the door open and stood aside for him to enter. And then she didn't say a word until he'd shoved it shut again. "I wasn't expecting you," she said. "I — we'd better talk in the kitchen. It's warmer out there."

She made no move to come near him, didn't put out her hands, even, and Dode wouldn't beg. He followed her back to the kitchen which looked different than he'd remembered it and stood with his hands to the stove, not taking off his coat. Not being asked to, either.

She was staring at him strangely — almost, he thought bitterly, as if she were afraid.

Her eyes were enormous and there were blotched places under them as though she might have been crying. Her face was like buff wax in this light.

The stillness grew; became as solid as a hand thrust against him, heavy as the past which they had hung around his neck. He spoke louder than he'd aimed: "It's been a long while, Tara," and heard the words echo and die away without answer.

She stood there with her frightened eyes until he wished, by cripes, he'd had the wit to keep away from here. Bad enough to discover what Buckner'd done with these years without being treated like a tramp with his hand out!

Mouth tight, he was wheeling to leave, when she said, "One thousand one hundred and two nights, Dode." It stopped him, half turned, and she lurched forward, swaying toward him blindly, hands out, groping. He pulled her hard against him.

He tried to blink the blur from his eyes, burrowing his scratchy cheek in her hair, drinking in the good clean smell of her; savoring to the full this moment. She wrenched her face aside, hard-panting. "It's Johnny, Dode — he's gone!" she cried. "Gone with the Colfax gang

to Crayfish Creek. They're going to stop Billy Madden's stage!"

He came out of the clouds with a shaken crash, for the first time noticing how she was dressed — the boots, split skirt, the hip-length coat on the table. He wasn't really surprised. His stiff lips said, "Why Madden's?"

"He's got the Goldfield run tonight. He's carrying the payroll for the Buckner mine — Dode . . . You've got to stop them!"

"Yes," he said, nodding. He was still regarding her but what he saw was Dawks and, back of Dawks, Buckner like a crouched and smiling spider. "Yes," he said again. It didn't matter that the kid wasn't worth it. Tara wanted him saved, and Dode wanted Tara. "I'd better have your Dad's Colt and that Henry."

She spun out of the room and was back with them at once, dropping a fistful of cartridges on the table. Dode said, "What time does Billy hit that grade?"

"He didn't know or wouldn't tell — but it would have to be late. The Goldfield run is on a through swing now. Tucson to —"

"What time will Madden come through here?"

Sweat showed its film of damp on her cheek as she looked up at the clock. Her eyes grew big with panic. "He'll be loading now —"

"You got a horse here handy?"

"Old Blackie's out back. I've got him tied to the porch rail." She held up her lips. "You be careful. . . ."

Riding through the blue-blackness of the wind-whipped hills, Dode remembered her words and smiled a little, grimly. He knew how it was with Tara. She'd practically raised that kid from the cradle. That would count for nothing with Dawks, though. There was just one way to save that kid.

I've got to stick up that stage myself, he thought.

He chose his spot three miles out of town where the road curled around the flank of a drop to come angling down across the Cork-Eden road. By the time Dode heard Madden coming his original thought had been augmented by another which, if right and he could prove it, might change the whole complexion of things and pay for those nights spent in Yuma.

He took a look at the sky and hoped the moon would break free in time to put some light on this business. . . .

The moon and the stage came in sight the same moment. Dode, kneeing the black out onto the road, caught Madden's startled shout and saw with a hammering heart that the old man had the box to himself. Brake blocks screeched. Madden, swearing, fetched the stage to a halt.

"Guess you remember me, Billy," Dode called up to him. He was sweatily fingering the hidden gun in his pocket and imploring all the saints to help the old man use his

head. "Got any passengers?"

"You know dang well I have —"

"Got that box for the Ingot?"

He could see Madden's tongue lick out across his wind-split lips and said, rightly gauging the man's bitter impulse, "Don't get me wrong, I wouldn't touch that box. We're takin' that box back into town."

"Back to town!" Madden echoed, through passengers' protests.

Dode took the hand with the gun from his pocket. "Get that coach turned around an' don't stop again till you pull up at the stage office."

Necks craned, heads twisted, and shouting men came clamoring as the rattling stage, swinging wide off Main, was set down in front of the office. The agent came hurrying out, "My Gawd, Bill —"

Dawks cleared the crowd with uncaring elbows. "Whereabouts did them owlhoots stick you up, Billy?"

"Didn't know I'd been stuck up."

The agent said, "If you didn't, why'd you fetch that stage back?"

"We're goin' to see," Billy answered. "First off, who put that box on for Ingot?"

The agent stuck a finger at Dawks.

"Well, what of it?" Dawks said, scowling up at old Madden. "As marshal of this burg, it's a part of my duties to make sure that any shipments of money goin' outa here are put on the stage without bein' tampered with —"

"That's fine," Madden drawled. "An' now who checks up on you?"

Before Dawks could get his rage set, Dode Rogers, still mounted, pushed into the light of the lanterns. "Three years ago," he said, "one of your inspections put me over the road to Yuma. I'd suggest Billy, you have that box —"

"Why, you jailbird . . ."

"Watch your hands, Marshal. I've got a gun in this pocket," Dode said tightly. "Get a hammer . . ."

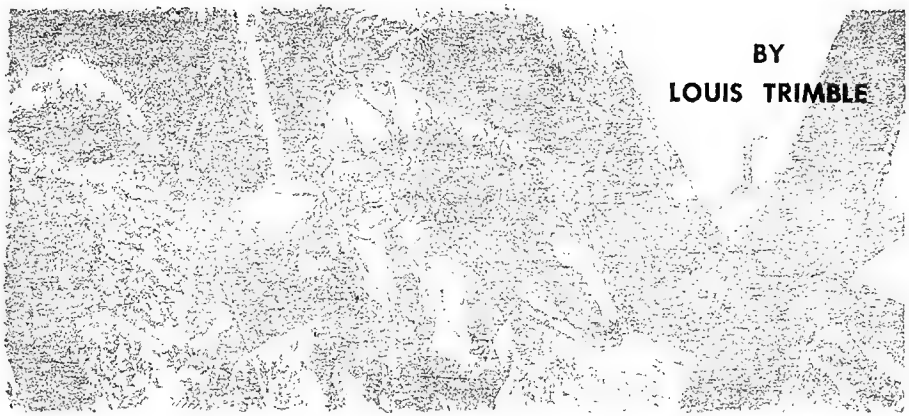
Over the heads of the scattering men around Dawks, he saw the marshal's hand jerk up, glinting. The racketing crash of two six-shooters pummeled the fronts of the buildings as the crowd broke.

Dode peered until the marshal, half turned, thrust a hand out and wilted. Then he slapped out the smoldering wool of his pocket.

Dode told Tara afterward, "None of that crew even mentioned the kid. They seen there was nothin' but a mess of sheared newspapers in the box and them passengers and Madden swearin' it hadn't been touched — They had it rigged to catch Johnny this time — and take care of me later — which Buckner reckoned would send you straight to his arms. All I done was smash that Dawks' shoulder but he blubbered like a two-year-old when he seen that batch of newsprint. The whole deal's on Buckner. Them insurance folks are going to —"

Tara said, "Let's talk about us."

And Dode said, taking her into his arms, "The hell with talk."



BY
LOUIS TRIMBLE

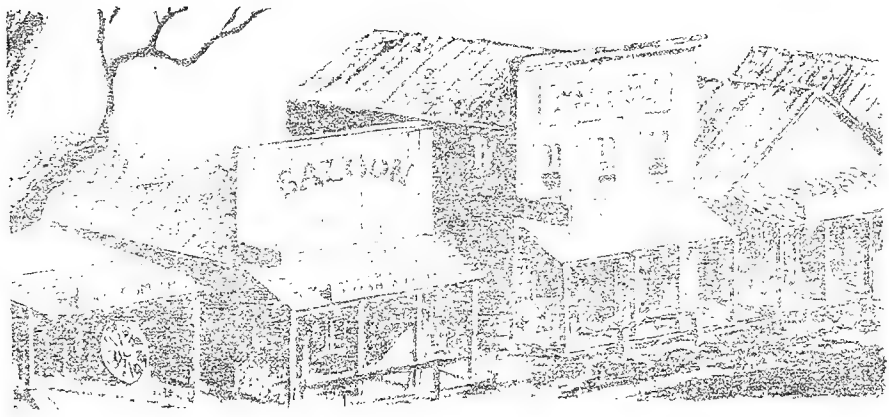
NO GUNS

WHEN Herne rode into town that evening he knew there would be trouble. He was bringing it.

He came the long way from his place on the edge of Horse Mesa, swinging around the bare hills that rose back of Vigilance and riding into town just at sunset. The single dusty street lay quiet at this, the dinner hour. Later, when the stored heat from the late spring sun had been sucked into the air and dissipated, people would begin moving about again up and down the board walks, in and out of the stores, open because it was Saturday night.

And the men from the ranches would begin coming into the saloons, looking to hone the edges from their thirst. Round-up was just over and many a man had not been in town for over a month. It was that way with Herne himself. And, he knew, with Sid Beeck. He was sure Sid hadn't been in town on Saturday night this past month because he and Sid had been having it out on Horse Mesa for longer than that now.

He rode in and left his horse and went looking for Sid Beeck. He stopped first at the Stockman's Bar and had whiskey to sharpen his appetite. He was a rangy man, young and lean and hard-muscled, his darkly tanned face set and angry now in such a way that the two old



The two men had fought each other since they'd been kids. But this time the fight was different. This time, it was for keeps.

timers at the bar moved farther along when he took his place.

The bartender poured the whiskey to the brim of the glass, "Seen Sid Beeck?" Herne asked.

"Not since before round-up. Nor you either."

Herne gulped his whiskey, feeling it warm him and relax him a little after the fast push from Horse Mesa. He said, "If you see Sid, tell him I'm looking for him."

As he started out, one of the old timers told the bartender, "Him and Sid Beeck been looking for each other ever since they was big enough to crawl. Had their first fight over a toy six shooter when they was less'n two years old."

Herne went on out, stopping at the next saloon, not for a drink, but to see if Sid Beeck had changed his hang-out. But there was only a two handed poker game going on between the hardware man and a dealer and there was no one else in the place besides the help. Herne hitched his trousers and went across the street to the hotel for dinner.

He ate slowly and methodically, satisfying his hunger thoroughly as he did everything else. But this night he did not seem to be enjoying himself as he usually did. When Mike Tate, the marshal, came in, he seemed to notice this and he dropped into a chair by Herne.

"You look sour as hell, boy. I

heard you had a good spring drop."

Herne emptied his mouth of meat and potatoes and tasted his coffee. "I'm looking for Sid Beeck," he said.

"You got as much a one track mind as him," Tate observed. "Someday you two'll beat each others brains out and that'll be the end of it."

"I'm going to find him," Herne said stubbornly.

Tate took time to order his meal, just as though there was something on the menu besides beefsteak and potatoes and then turned his attention back to Herne. "Looking for a fight, I suppose."

"After this, he's going to leave me alone," Herne said. He wiped his plate carefully with his last piece of bread, chewed steadily until it was gone and reached for his coffee again.

"This country never has been big enough for both of us."

"Not as long as you're feuding," Tate admitted. He got up and came over to where Herne sat and looked at him searchingly. "No gun," he said as if to himself and sat down again.

"No gun," Herne admitted. "As long as I'm in your town, marshal, I'll stick to the rules."

He rolled a cigaret, shaping it carefully, and taking the first drag deeply with a great deal of satisfaction. "But one of these days, Sid is going to push too far out on the Mesa and then it will be guns. That's why I want to settle it now."

Tate settled himself to his eating as his food arrived. Herne said, "If you see him, tell him I'm looking for him."

"No knives neither," was all Tate said.

Herne walked out and found the street cooling and darkening. Across the way the lights of the two saloons were shining yellow through their windows and doors into the dust of the roadway. Now there was a string of horses before each hitching rail and wagons were beginning to move up and down the street, some stopping before the stores to let women climb down. When this was done, the men would wheel their buckboards and spring wagons around to the town lot and tie up and then go off to the saloons to wait out the shopping.

It was a regular Saturday night, Herne thought. The pattern had not changed much since he could remember. Later, after the women had gone home and the stores were shut up, things would get louder. Tate would have to step in and stop a few fist fights, but since he had forbidden guns in town not much else in the line of fighting ever happened.

Herne could remember when every Saturday night meant that Tate would sooner or later have to stop him and Sid Beeck from fighting. But that had been when they were kids and had little sense of responsibility. As they got older

they had had to spend more time making a living and less time brawling. At least less time in open brawling. But what was going on now was a good deal more serious than those Saturday night flights they had had.

He went back to the Stockman's, knowing Sid's nature well enough to be sure that Sid would come to town to celebrate his victory over Herne. It had started in fun, the fighting. Kids brawled in school and out because it was their nature to do so. And it had been turn about in winning with Sid's bulk getting the upper hand one time and Herne's lean quickness winning out another. But as they grew older the fun wore out of it and both knew instinctively that some day one of them would be enough better so that the other would break.

Now was the time for one of them to break, Herne thought savagely. This was the turning point, and he was having to stake the rest of his future on Horse Mesa against his fists with Sid Beeck when he found him.

The beginning had been innocent enough. The railroad was coming up from the south and a representative came to Vigilance asking for bids for a contract to grade the right of way across the desert. As Herne had had experience working on stagecoach roads these last few years to get money to lift the mortgage his plunging father had put on the ranch, he had put in his bid. It was not big, but he saw a chance at profit enough to really put the ranch back on its feet. He had studied it carefully, as always, in his cautious manner, before doing anything.

Sid Beeck was a horseman. He had spent his working years rounding up the wild stock that clung to the far edge of Horse Mesa and selling to army posts and stage lines. He had a way with horses like no one else Herne had ever known. And he figured that, having horses to offer that cost him nothing, he could get into the bidding as well. Herne's offer had beat him by a hundred dollars.

That had started it. Coming out of the bank where Herne had just slapped the mortgage back on the ranch to get equipment, Sid said, "You'll whistle for horses in these parts."

"The hell I will," Herne said. "Those horses up on the Mesa belong to the man who can corral them. I intend to get them the same way you figured to."

"Cattle is your business, horses mine," Sid Beeck told him. "Don't nose into my business."

Herne said, "I've licked you more than once for cutting my fence and using cattle graze for horse traps. There'll be no more of that."

Sid Beeck was a man with a one-track mind and an implacable will to push him to his goal. Now he said, "I work Horse Mesa outside your fenceline. Just remember it's my territory."

That was the way it had started,

Herne remembered sourly. Sid was not the kind to give a futile warning. With half his crew at round-up, Herne had taken the rest and gone to work, using Sid's trick of luring wild stock into his lush cattle graze. But it was like pushing a hand into gum. You made the dent and then it oozed back and was the same again.

The first time he had a bunch of ten corralled, the next day he found his fence laid open and the horses gone. The second time, he brought six to the home ranch and ran them into the corral there. In the morning the corral bars were down and the horses gone. After that he posted a guard and managed to keep a dozen. But when they went onto the range to get more stock, there wasn't any about. Finally he found that Sid was working nights, hazing the horses up through Sawtelle's Gap and over into the timber country.

Horses didn't like timber country nor did they like a change. They came drifting back and Herne kept going out, nipping off a few now and then before Sid could drive them back over the Gap. But it was slow work and the time kept squeezing up on Herne. He knew he should get started, get the horses and break them and get the equipment that was waiting at the end of the rails into operation. His contract called for him to be back into Vigilance by the first snow and he was going to need a long summer to make it.

But his bid had been low because he figured on the wild stock free of charge. If he had to buy work stock, then he wouldn't make it. By a stroke of luck round-up was over early and Herne turned the rest of his crew to the task of getting the needed number of horses.

By the simple expedient of cutting into the timber and combing through it toward the Gap, he and his men drove a big band easily back onto the Mesa. By Friday night he had them rounded up, on the fenced graze, and ready to be driven far enough from Sid to where they could be broken at leisure. They took turn guarding all night, opened the gate Saturday at daybreak for the drive, and lost over sixty per cent of the band when two wild mares in heat were sent plunging out of the flats, stampeding the old stallion who led the band and the young stallions waiting for their chances to dispute his leadership.

Herne spent the day futilely rounding up a half-dozen head. Through the heat and dust he could hear Sid Beeck's bull-voiced laughter ringing in his head. And, in the afternoon, he got a fresh horse and headed for town to find Sid Beeck.

The Stockman's was full the second time Herne stepped inside. Over the tinkle of the piano and the stamp of dancer's feet, he could hear the laughter of Sid Beeck from the bar and he knew that Sid was telling the story to anyone who would listen.

Herne walked slowly forward, shouldering his way through the crowd standing two deep at the bar.

There was a slowly settling silence behind him, as though his steadily determined passing were sucking the noise from the air.

He pushed his way to where Sid Beeck leaned his great bulk on the bar. There was a mug of beer half drunk before Sid and he was chewing a thick stogie while he talked. Herne eased a man away from his spot and stepped into it, next to Sid.

The bartender came forward. Herne said, "Whiskey," in a quiet voice.

Sid Beeck's roar stopped suddenly. He turned and looked at Herne and then straightened up so that they were standing eye to eye. "I hear you're looking for me."

"I found you," Herne said in the same quiet voice. "Now I'm taking you back to the Mesa. Feet first if no other way."

Sid Beeck was fresh from the barber shop and his skin, newly shaved, was ruddy against the darker skin where he had had no beard. He pushed his hat back a little from his yellow-blond hair, wrapped his lips around his stogie and blew a smoke ring. Then he laughed.

"I told you your business was beef and mine was horses. You shoulda left it that way."

Herne kept his voice quiet. Now that he was face to face with Sid Beeck for the first time since they had left the bank, the anger that had been building up in him settled into a cold, hard lump in his belly. It was not the hot anger that had always fed him before when he and Sid went for each other. This was somehow different, and a little frightening. His natural caution reined him in, and Herne said only, "I didn't leave it that way."

Sid took the time to gulp his beer. He wiped foam from his lips and took another puff on his cigar. "What was it you wanted to see me about?" He sounded innocently curious.

Someone behind Herne snickered. There was a short curse and a man grunted in sudden pain. Herne turned and saw two of his own men standing by one of Sid Beeck's crew. Beeck's man had pain splotched across his face and he was holding his belly with both hands.

"You," Herne ordered, "keep out of this. It's between Sid and me."

His men shrugged and moved aside. Sid's wrangler turned and went to where he could sit down. When Herne glanced at Beeck again, he saw the gleam in Beeck's gray eyes that meant the same as it always had — the pleasure at a prospective fight.

Herne said, "This isn't like before, Sid. I'm not fighting you for fun. I'm not fighting you to prove I'm a better man than you."

"You never did prove it," Sid said tauntingly.

"I don't intend to. I told you I came to take you back to the Mesa. You coming sitting in the saddle or do you want to be roped into it?"

"And when you get me there?"

Sid asked. There was laughter in his voice.

"We'll talk of that when you're there."

Sid finished his beer and took two last puffs on his cigar before dropping it into a spittoon. "Maybe I want to talk about it here."

Herne lifted his whiskey, downed it quickly, and set the glass back on the bar. He said, "Tonight Marshal Tate agreed with me that this country wasn't big enough for both of us."

From the doorway, the marshal said, "I said as long as you two fools is feuding it ain't big enough. Move aside, you. . . ." He came forward with his bandy-legged stride and peered at both Herne and Sid Beeck. "No guns," he said finally.

"And no knives," Herne told him dryly.

Sid took his clasp knife from his pocket and laid it on the bar. "Got this, marshal."

"Damn fools," Tate said, ignoring him. He swung about. "Any fighting from you two and I'll lock you both up." He went back the way he had come, the crowd surging aside to let him through. When the door had stopped swinging behind him, Herne turned back to Sid.

"It isn't big enough, Sid."

"Have it your way," Sid Beeck said. He put the clasp knife back into his pocket, lifted his beer glass and drained out the last few drops, set the glass down, and suddenly took a roundhouse swing at Herne's head. His arm hit at air.

Herne stepped back, ducking instinctively before Sid had his swing in full motion. He came in at the side, driving a fist into Sid's ribs. Sid took the blow rolling, put both hands behind him on the bar and used the leverage to lift himself up and kick out at Herne.

Herne waited for the fraction of a second Sid would be off balance, drove in and got a grip on Sid's waist and lifted. Sid came away from the bar, kicking, and his weight drove them both to the floor. Herne rolled free and lashed his fist into Sid's mouth, and then got to his feet.

Sid lifted a fist. Herne ducked down and came up, his left arm knocking the fist aside, and his right boring into Sid's face. He danced back, flicking his fists in and out as Sid moved slowly and ponderously toward him. He could see in Sid's eyes now that the gleam was gone and the dull fire of his single-mindedness was there instead. Sid might have forgotten for the moment what the fight was about but that wouldn't stop him from keeping on until he was unconscious or the winner.

The cold anger that had lain in Herne's stomach was slowly dissolving, melting into the hot flame that fed fuel to his muscles, keeping them going when he was too weary or too beat to know what was happening to him. He had experienced this before, he thought, a little crazily now.

He and Sid had been doing this how long? He counted back, thinking of the old timer's remark that they had begun it when they were two. That would make it twenty-three years, he figured, and suddenly he had a wild impulse to laugh.

The laughter came without control, burbling up from inside him. Sid drove it back into his throat with a swing that mashed his lips hard against his teeth, and Herne shook his head, suddenly aware again of what was going on.

He ducked the next swing, went under Sid's guard and hit his iron-ribbed belly with both fists. Sid gurgled for air and gave ground. Herne pressed his advantage, keeping at Sid's middle, driving him toward the bar, letting Sid's wild swings club around his head and shoulders. Sid's back hit the bar and he tried to push at Herne, to find room to move in. But now it was Herne's advantage and he lifted his range and went to work on Sid's face.

Sid let out a bellow as blood spurted from his nose and he lowered his head, took a fist against his mouth, and then drove at Herne. Herne went backward, stumbled over a leg thrust in his way and crashed to the floor on his back. Swearing, he turned and pushed to right himself before Sid could take advantage of this and land on him with his weight driving both feet down in a bone-crushing jump.

The sudden roar of men shouting beat at Herne's ears. He got to his feet and shook his head. Sid was standing still, his arms hanging at his sides, blood streaming from his nose and trickling from a cut at the corner of his mouth. Herne wiped at his own lips, feeling the warm stickiness there.

Marshal Tate stood between them. "I told you to quit fighting," he said. "Now you'll both come with me."

"You tripped me?" Herne asked.

"You're danged right."

"It wasn't fair," Sid Beeck said. "Jim and me was having a peaceful, fair fight. You ain't got the right to interfere."

"I said you'll come with me, both of you."

Herne looked at Sid Beeck and Sid looked back at him out of eyes puffed and half closed. Then, silently, both men fell into step with the marshal and started out of the saloon.

Herne was grateful for the outside air. Chill now, it soothed the cuts on his face and drove the heavy smoke from his lungs. He sucked it in deeply as he and Sid walked stiffly alongside Tate toward the jail house.

It was at the upper end of town, not a half block from the town limits. On the way they passed the lighted veranda of the hotel and then stepped into the darker area where a vacant lot separated the hotel from the jail.

Sid Beeck said, "Now?"

"Now," Herne agreed.

Each man took one of the marshal's arms and lifted him. They swung in unison and Marshal Tate described an arc and landed in the weedy vacant lot. They could hear him swearing as they broke into a run, past the jail house, and to the edge of town. Here they stopped.

"You . . . you. . . ." Tate yelled. He came toward them, grass clinging to his hair. He stopped when he saw that they were beyond the town limits.

"You step foot in this town and you'll go to jail and stay a while."

"No bail, marshal?" Sid Beeck asked.

"It'll be danged high," Tate said. He stayed where he was so he could watch.

Herne turned to Beeck. "Just see that you don't let me knock you back into town, Sid. The marshal'll jail you for sure."

Sid Beeck answered with a swing, charging, his head down. Herne stepped back, let Sid go by and clubbed him at the back of the neck. Sid kept going forward, his body low and then pitched on his face in the dirt of the roadway. Herne leaped, coming down on Sid's back with both knees. Sid grunted and twisted, throwing Herne to one side.

Herne turned back and swung and his fist slipped on the blood still coming from Sid's nose. Sid howled and cuffed Herne alongside the head.

Both men got to their feet. Herne moved in this time, coming cautiously. Sid flicked out a tentative fist and Herne batted it away and drove his own against Sid's belly. Sid gave ground. Herne swung again. Sid continued to move back. Herne was careful, watching for a trick.

It came as he saw that Sid was being backed off the road toward the weeds that lined it. Sid suddenly stopped and when Herne hit him, went down to his knees. He rolled his weight forward, caught Herne about the thighs and straightened up. Herne felt the rush of night air as he was lifted and then the air went out of him as his back struck the weedy ground along the road. He had a blurred glimpse of Sid coming down on him, diving with his weight for Herne's unprotected middle.

Herne lifted a knee and Sid came against it with his face. Herne felt the weight drive his knee back into his chest, drive the rest of the wind out of him. He heard Sid's grunt of surprise and then Sid's bulk was gone and there was only the star-lighted darkness coming down.

Herne was motionless a moment and then he rolled to one elbow. Sid lay on his face, not moving, his own force against Herne's knee having done more damage than Herne could have. Herne got to his knees, his head hanging. After a moment he could breathe more easily and he grabbed Sid by the collar and rolled him over.

"Want to smother in the weeds?" he demanded.

Sid did not answer. His mouth was slack, his eyes shut. He was out cold. Herne got to his feet and looked around. Men had drifted up from the saloon and were standing at the town limits watching.

Herne said, "Somebody bring our horses."

The crowd began to break up and in a few moments Herne's own riders appeared with Sid's two men, leading their horses. Herne said, "Stay in town. This is between us."

The men turned and went back to the saloon. Herne got Sid by the scruff of the collar and the seat of his jeans and hauled. Sid was heavy and it took every bit of strength Herne had to get his bulky belly down across the saddle. Then, carefully he ran Sid's rope around the man's body, securing him to the saddle.

Mounting his own horse, he tied Sid's reins to the back of his saddle and started for Horse Mesa.

Halfway there, Sid awoke and yelled. Herne called back, "I said you were going back to the Mesa. It was your choice to go belly down."

Sid swore but said nothing further. By the time they reached Herne's place, Herne was reeling in the saddle. Stiffly he climbed down, walked to Sid's horse and began untying the ropes. Sid slid to the ground, went to one knee, came to his feet, and drove a fist against Herne's jaw. Herne went backward against the corral fence. The top bar broke and he went over, face first into the dust.

Sid came over after him, taking the second bar off with his chest. Herne rolled and let Sid hit with his shoulder and then both men got to their feet, facing each other in the darkness.

"What was it you wanted to see me about?" Sid asked.

Herne's laugh was a little crazy. "I guess I did say we'd talk about it when we got here. That was a good wallop you just gave me."

"You're beat, Herne. I had a sleep. I'm fresher'n you."

"Go to hell," Herne said. "I'm waiting."

"Before I beat you unconscious I want to know what you drug me here for."

Herne said, "You've been in my hair for over a month now. That trick this morning took sixty per cent of the horses I had rounded up."

It was Sid's turn to laugh. "Mares'll do it every time," he said.

"You have a way with horses," Herne said. "I haven't. But I have the savvy on building this road. You haven't. So I hire you to furnish and break the horses. And help with the work — if you're man enough!"

"You hire me? Go to the devil!"

"By God," Herne said. He stepped forward and swung on Sid Beeck. Sid took the blow on his shoulder and came around with his fist. It caught Herne like a maul alongside the head and drove him back into the darkness. He got to his feet in time to take Sid's other fist against

his ear. He went down again and this time he stayed. The starry darkness was no longer that — it was completely black.

When he came to he could smell coffee and the light of the lamp hurt his eyes. Sid said, "Here," and as Herne turned toward his voice, threw a dipper of water into his face.

Herne came up fighting until he saw he was in his own kitchen. He stopped and stared at Sid. "You ain't hiring me," Sid told him. "And I ain't hiring you. It's even or nothing."

Herne worked his head on his neck to get the kinks out. Then he took the cup of fresh, strong coffee Sid held out to him. He sucked at it, wincing when the heat hit his bruised lips. He glanced up.

"I can still lick you," he said.

"Every other time about," Sid agreed. "Fifty per cent of the time."

"All right," Herne said, "a fifty-fifty partnership."

Sid drank his own coffee. "Might as well tell you I got them horses coralled that you lost today. Spent the afternoon at it. We can start breaking tomorrow."

Herne said, "What happens when we go back to town? We'll have to when we grade the right-of-way in."

Sid scratched his yellow thatch of hair thoughtfully. "Why," he said, "I'll fight you to see which one of us pays the bail."

"You're on," Herne said. He took out his sack of tobacco, hesitated, and then handed it to Sid first.

OWLHOOT Who's Who

BY T. W. RAINES

CLAY ALLISON

CLAY ALLISON got into the habit of killing men in the War Between the States. He was a Tennessean transplanted to Texas, and he never grew tired of killing Yankees — even after it became illegal. Except for his tendency to *hurrah* towns and go gunning for peace officers (especially if they had served in the Union Army), he seems to have been a very law-abiding gent.

Descriptions of Allison vary slightly. One person remembers him as tall and another as of medium height. It may be that these persons saw him under differing circumstances. He no doubt looked very tall indeed when he rode into a saloon on horseback and took a drink in the saddle.

But whether he was six-feet-two or a few inches shorter, he was a man-killer right down to his boots, and always looked the part without putting on a show. He had piercing blue eyes, a neat black moustache with small chin-beard, a sharp face, and a pleasant smile. He dressed fastidiously, with a black and white color scheme in his clothing, trappings, and horses — one of which was coal black and the other creamy white.

When Allison died he had either sixteen or eighteen notches on his gun. The exact number is not certain, but after the war he got off to a flying start in Cimarron, New Mexico, when he killed five Negro soldiers without the slightest provocation.

He was a periodic drinker, and this happened to be one of his "periods." The Negro soldiers came into the saloon and asked for a drink in a manner purposely designed not to give offense to anybody. But Allison

cursed them, drew his gun, and shot all five. Afterwards, he waited for several hours, hoping the rest of the detachment of soldiers would try to arrest him, but finally left and headed home.

The next day, he submitted to arrest and agreed to ride to Taos for a trial, but insisted on keeping his guns. He started out for Taos with a sheriff and a squad of soldiers as escort. About halfway there he noticed a dead skunk in the road and stopped beside it.

"I've gone as far as I mean to," Allison said. He drew his gun and snatched off the sheriff's hat. "But you're going on to Taos. Put that skunk in your hat, put it back on your head, and wear it. If you take it off before you get there, I'll kill you."

He covered the detachment as it marched by nervously. When last seen, the sheriff was riding towards town with a skunk on his head.

Allison continued to rule Cimarron for some time. He was not a thief or a renegade, but he did like to be top dog in the district. He had a prosperous ranch, and a crew of Texans who backed him whenever he went into town. Thus, he could make his living respectably and raise hell on the side. He liked to get roaring drunk, tree the town, and ride down the main street standing in his stirrups naked except for boots and hat, threatening to shoot anybody whose head showed.

For three years Cimarron had no town marshal, and no sheriff or deputy from other districts felt called upon to venture into that territory. It was considered too unhealthy.

Once Allison heard that a young man called Chunk had threatened to shoot him. He promptly went looking for Chunk, found him in a restaurant, and sat down at the table with him. Then he called to the waiter, "Coffee and six-shooters for two!"

Both men drew, and Allison won hands down. He had hardly finished adding the notch to his gun when he discovered he had taken on more than he bargained for. Mace Bowman, a first-rate gunfighter, turned out to be the young man's uncle.

After a long parley, Bowman finally agreed the shooting was justified. But by that time Allison was fighting mad, ready to kill Bowman. Unfortunately, Bowman was faster on the draw. So the story goes, they stood in front of a bar for several hours with Allison trying to get the drop on Bowman. But every time Allison's hand dropped to his gun, Bowman would beat him to the draw — without shooting. Reportedly, this happened a hundred times, but each time Allison found himself balked.

Allison then tried to out-drink Bowman in order to get the drop on him, but Bowman held his liquor so well that he finally left Allison dead drunk. When word of this got around, the citizens of the district

decided they had found the man who ought to be sheriff.

Bowman was elected, and his first job was to keep Allison quiet. Allison quickly made his challenge, and Bowman took it up just as quickly. He came into the saloon with two six-shooters and a shotgun, ready for a showdown. Instead, Allison chose to take orders and leave town. He had too much respect for Bowman's fighting ability ever to try forcing the issue again, and soon moved back to Texas. He seemed to know when he had met his match.

Bowman could have had several reasons for not wanting to shoot Allison when he had the chance. He might have had the peaceable man's natural reluctance to kill when not absolutely forced to it, and also he might have heard of Allison's two brothers. Both were said to be just as wild and dangerous as Allison, and anybody who shot him would also have to shoot them.

Later, Allison is credited by some with having scared Bat Masterson into a hole at Dodge City. If the stories are true, he went with twenty-five cowboys backing him and cleaned out all the saloons in a vain search for Masterson. Otherwise, Allison does not have distinguished names on his fighting roster. Some of the peace officers he shot might have made legendary fame if they had shot *him* — but they didn't. Their failure let Allison go on adding notches to his gun until at last he fell out of a wagon while drunk and broke his neck.

Killer

He'd killed Olivera's wife and sent Olivera to jail. Now Olivera was on the loose, gunning for him . . .

A Novelette

BY H. A. DEROSSO

It was the middle of the morning when the rider topped the rise and started down the road to Baxter's ranch. Baxter was down in a corral teaching a colt to respond to the bit when the horseman appeared. Baxter stopped his work and came out of the corral. He did not know why but a sudden, unpleasant premonition had come over him.

He went over to the windmill and had a drink and then his eyes sought the rider again. The land was flat and open here, making it possible to see a long way. The rider was nearer but he was still unrecognizable. There seemed to be something portentous in the way he came, with

deliberateness and lack of hurry.

Baxter leaned against the edge of the tank and watched. He was a tall, lean man with a brown, creased face. His lips were parted a little with the intensity of his stare, thus revealing the startling whiteness of his teeth. His eyes were a shade between green and gray and he had a long nose that was hooked a little at the bridge. His gaunt cheeks made tiny hollows on either side of his face.

He was dressed in blue levis and a tan denim shirt that had small spots of wetness under the armpits and in the small of the back. He wore the levis with a wide cuff that revealed the lower half of plain black boots that were beginning to show wear. His spurs were plain steel affairs with small rowels. His hat was a high-crowned stetson, creased in the front and with the brim curled up at the sides.

He built a smoke and watched the rider come on. The horseman grew as he approached and eventually recognition came to Baxter. The rider was Sheriff Mike McCall.

Again the breath of something ominous passed through Baxter's mind and left him baffled. He could not understand why he should feel this way.

McCall spied Baxter at the tank and the sheriff turned his roan that way. He rode the horse up to the water and then dismounted. There was dust on McCall's clothing and he brushed some of this off before he took a drink.

Then he said, "Hello, Dan."

Dan Baxter nodded. He had been sheriff of Dona Luz county before McCall. Two years ago he had retired to devote all his time to ranching and Mike McCall had been elected. McCall was a good man, Baxter thought.

Baxter's eyes narrowed as they studied the sheriff. Mike McCall was a stocky man of medium height. He was in his early forties. He had a wide face marked by two long dimples and a pair of hard gray eyes. Today he looked rather grim.

Baxter glanced from this look on McCall's face to the man's weapons. The black handle of a .45 Colt jutted out of McCall's holster and every loop of this belt was filled with shells. Above this belt, McCall wore another one, this one studded with .44-40's for the Winchester which he carried in his saddle scabbard.

A chill sense of foreboding settled between Baxter's shoulder blades.

McCall took out the makings and built himself a cigarette with care. He proffered the Bull Durham to Baxter but Baxter showed him what he had left of his smoke and so McCall put the tobacco sack back in a shirt pocket. He struck a match and lit his smoke and took a deep inhalation. When he let it out, he did so with an audible, lingering sigh.

Mike McCall stared down at the cigarette in his fingers and said, "Jesse Olivera broke out of the pen, Dan." He said it quietly.

That was it, Baxter thought immediately, that was the feeling that had been troubling him. A thing like this had been on his brain for almost five years but he had tucked it so far back in his mind that he seldom remembered. It had gotten so that he had begun to delude himself that it no longer existed. Now he realized the folly of it. It was real again — and menacing, and deadly.

Baxter's heart was hammering a little, the breath was tight in his throat, but the tone of his voice revealed none of this. "When did you find out?" he asked quietly.

"The wire came this morning. Olivera broke out early last night but they didn't let me know until they were sure he was heading this way."

"This way?" Baxter echoed.

"Where else?"

Yes, Baxter thought, where else? For five years he had been expecting this day. As time wore on, he had begun to forget a little, the reality of it had faded until it was almost like the memory of a bad dream, but the remembrance had never gone completely. It was a thing that had to be, Baxter thought. It had had an inevitability as certain as death.

He became aware that McCall was staring intently at him. However, Baxter kept staring out over the land but never quite seeing it. He was seeing only the image of Jesse Olivera.

"I thought I'd stop by and let you know, Dan," McCall said after a while.

"Thanks, Mike."

McCall's gaze was a little hard, a little keen. "Keep your eyes peeled."

"I'll do that, Mike."

McCall sighed. He took a last puff on his smoke and ground it out under his heel. "Well, I've got to get going."

"Where you headed?"

"The Diablos." McCall paused as though thinking about something. Then he went on, "That's where Olivera was headed the last time he was seen."

"No posse?" asked Baxter.

McCall shrugged. "Olivera's one man," he said. He turned an intent look on Baxter. "Would you have taken a posse?"

Baxter smiled faintly and shook his head.

Saddle leather creaked as McCall swung up into the kak. He settled himself in the seat. He appeared about to start the roan but then he laid another long, considering look on Baxter. McCall's lips parted a little as though he were going to say something but then he decided against it. He touched the roan with the spurs.

Baxter said, "Luck, Mike."

McCall acknowledged this with a slight rise of his right hand. Then the roan was moving away. It circled the buildings and then struck out across the land in a direct line for the Diablos. McCall rode hunched forward. He never looked back . . .

Baxter stood a while by the tank, lost in thought. His thinking was mostly of the old days and of how at one time the enforcement of the law had meant everything to him. It had been more than a job or a career with him. It had almost been a sacred dedication to duty.

In those days, he had thought that he would never voluntarily give up the sheriff's job. That had been before the capture and arrest of Jesse Olivera. Afterward, the job had begun to pall on Baxter and eventually he had decided not to run for reelection. He gave the excuse that he had bought a ranch and that he had recently married but in the privacy of his own mind he knew it was something more than that. It was something he did not like to think about. It was something he tried to forget and which he had trained his mind to fail to remember during his hours of wakefulness but the recollection still haunted his dreams.

He had known this day would come. He had known it as surely and inevitably as night follows day. He had known that stone walls and steel bars would not hold Jesse Olivera, not with what Olivera had in mind. Now that it had happened, Baxter, somehow, felt relieved.

It did not take Baxter long to decide what to do. He was of the frontier and he lived by a code. The code was harsh and grim and even brutal at times but it was the only way of life Dan Baxter knew. It was also the way of life of Jesse Olivera. He owed something to the man, Baxter thought. He would give it to Olivera.

Baxter went back to the breaking corral and unsaddled the colt. Then he saddled a buckskin, which was his favorite mount, and led the animal up to the house.

When he came through the door, Penny, his wife, said, "What did Mike McCall want?"

Baxter scarcely heard her. His mind was on other things. She repeated the question.

Baxter collected himself enough to answer her. "He just stopped to water his horse, Penny."

"What's up, Dan?"

He took his belt and holstered .44 down from the peg on the wall. Breaking open a fresh box of cartridges, he filled the empty loops. Then he buckled the belt about his waist. After that, he picked up his Winchester in its saddle boot.

"What's up, Dan?" Penny asked again. There was a little apprehension in her tone.

Baxter knew he had to tell her something. He could not tell her the truth because she could not understand. Even he did not understand it fully. He searched for words and found none.

Penny placed herself in front of him so that he could not go to the door. She took his arms in her hands and tilted her head back to better study his face. He tried a smile, hoping to reassure her with it, but it did not quite come off.

"Where are you going, Dan?" she asked. "What are you going to do?"

He stared at her, helpless for words. She was a very pretty woman, he thought, and he considered himself fortunate having her for a wife. The top of her blonde head reached to his chin. With her head dropped back, he could see the troubled look in her blue eyes. She had long, thin lips and a smooth, round face. Seeing her like this, made him remember the many times he'd had her in his arms, and reminded him, poignantly, that perhaps he might never hold her again.

"McCall told you something," she said when he did not speak. He could feel the pressure of her fingers against his flesh. "What was it, Dan?"

He supposed she had to know. He shrugged and said, looking away from her, "Jesse Olivera broke out of the pen. He's up in the Diablos."

Her breath made a sharp sound as she sucked it in. She knew about him and Olivera, Baxter thought, but she did not understand just exactly how it was and how it had to be. She could never understand a thing like that.

"Where are you going then?" she asked.

He told her as much as he would ever tell her. "Into the Diablos."

"No," she said. He saw the sudden fear constrict the corners of her mouth. Her eyes were bright with the fright that was in her. "You can't go there. You mustn't. You know that Olivera has sworn to kill you."

Baxter shrugged. He said nothing. He just didn't know the words to express what he felt inside.

"Let McCall do it alone," she begged. "If he needs help, let him find someone else. Not you, Dan. Let McCall find someone else."

"I'm not going with McCall," he said.

Her breath drew in again audibly. Her face twisted in a grimace of fear and incomprehension. "I don't understand, Dan," she said.

"I'm going alone."

"Alone?" she echoed, as if she could not believe what she had heard. "Why alone?"

"You wouldn't understand, Penny."

He broke her grip on him, gently, and went over and began getting a pack of food together. She came with him. She kept trying to turn him around so that he would have to look at her but he kept his face averted.

"Dan, Dan," she cried, "this doesn't make sense, Dan. You've got to be careful. You've got to stay here where Olivera can't get to you."

"If he got out of the pen, he can get here."

"Maybe McCall will take him. Isn't that what he's going into the Diablos for?"

"Maybe McCall won't be able to take him."

"But what can you do? What can

you do alone? He'll kill you, Dan. He'll kill you!"

She started to cry now. She put her face in her hands and wept. It was the first time he had seen her this way. Baxter experienced a slight lessening of his purpose but it was not much. It certainly was not enough. Nothing could deter him, he thought, not even this woman whom he loved very dearly.

Gently, he forced her hands away from her face. He put a finger under her chin and tilted it. Tears were channeling down her cheeks.

"Look, Penny," he said, "it's something I've got to do. It's something I owe to Olivera. That's the only way I can put it. I know you don't understand but that's the way it is."

"It wasn't your fault," she said between sobs. "You were only doing your job. You don't owe Olivera anything. Please don't go into the Diablos."

"I've got to," he said with a sigh. "I've got to, Penny . . ."

II

He did not build a fire that night. It was a chance he could not take. He wrapped himself up in his blankets and lay on the cold ground. For supper he'd had cold biscuits that he'd taken with him and cold jerky. He lay there and tried to sleep but he wasn't very successful.

He was in the Diablos. Not very deep perhaps, but he was in them. In the darkness he could sense the looming of the high, naked peaks all around him. Stars glittered like cold, twinkling steel overhead. All about there was the silence of the mountains, awesome and mysterious and forbidding. The only sounds he heard were the fretful stirrings of his buckskin as it moved around at the end of its picket rope.

Baxter lay there in his blankets and tried to sleep. He would close his eyes and concentrate on dropping off but that never worked. It only brought the memory more vividly to his mind. He tried fighting it at first but then he realized the futility of this. He relaxed and let the remembrance come as it wished.

He lay there with his eyes wide open now, remembering.

He had gone to arrest Jesse Olivera on a charge of rustling. It had been a night, something like this, that he'd ridden up to Olivera's place. He dismounted and called out Olivera's name. Olivera replied with a gunshot.

Baxter took cover. He called out to Olivera to surrender. Olivera had replied with defiance and more gunshots. So Baxter settled down to wait it out.

The stars were out and they gave a little light. It was possible to distinguish shadows although the exact nature of them was not too apparent. It was under these conditions that Olivera made a break for it.

The two of them burst from the house together and on the instant Baxter did not stop to think. He

called out a warning and the blaring of a gun answered him. The two were making for a corral.

Baxter laid down his reply with his .44. He emptied the weapon and then it was over, except for the echoes which were still rolling in the far distance. Baxter reloaded and then he went in cautiously to see what had been done.

One of them was dead. At first, Baxter thought this was a rather slim boy but then, bending down, he got a look of long hair fanned out and the realization was like a hard blow in the stomach. This was a woman dressed in men's clothing. This was Maria Olivera, Jesse Olivera's wife.

Olivera still lived. He was faint with shock and the pain of his wound but he came to enough to try to bring up his gun. Baxter kicked it out of his hand. Olivera dragged himself on the ground until he was next to his dead wife. He felt her dead face and caressed her hair. He did not cry. He dipped a finger in the blood of his dead wife and drew a cross on his forehead. Then he looked up at Baxter.

"I will kill you one day," said Olivera. "I swear I will kill you. In the blood of my Maria I swear it . . ."

It was the remembrance of this that did not let Baxter sleep. He lay there staring wide-eyed out at the night. The air was cold but beads of sweat coated Baxter's brow . . .

The three riders appeared early the next morning. Patches of shadow still clung to the mountainsides because the sun was not yet high enough. Sage and manzanita huddled lonesomely. There was stillness everywhere except for the sounds the buckskin made.

The horse topped a hill and there below him Baxter spied the riders. They spotted him, too, and they reined in their mounts and for a while they sat there, staring up at him. He knew them and they knew him. Baxter did not know why but that chill sense of foreboding passed over him, even though these were not enemies of his.

After a while, Baxter sent the buckskin down the slope. The three waited for him. When he rode up, two of the riders nodded their greetings. The third one spoke.

"Hello, Dan," he said.

"Hello, George."

The one who had spoken was named George Chamberlain. He was about Baxter's age, thirty-four. Chamberlain was a tall, tawny man with a yellow mustache drooping down around the corners of his mouth. His eyes also held a hint of yellow color and they seemed forever withdrawn and wary.

Baxter noted the filled shell belt about Chamberlain's waist and the butt of a carbine sticking out of a saddle boot. Baxter looked then at Chamberlain's companions and noted that they, too, were heavily armed.

It seemed that everyone who rode into the Diablos now was overloaded

with hardware, Baxter thought grimly.

Those cautious eyes of Chamberlain studied Baxter carefully. "You alone?" asked Chamberlain.

Baxter nodded.

"How come?"

"Maybe I'm anti-social," said Baxter.

Chamberlain flushed angrily. To cover his resentment, he took out a sack and began to build a cigarette.

Baxter could feel the other two studying him intently. He turned his head and gave each of them a cool, hard appraisal. These were not enemies but he had never admired them, either, and this feeling was reciprocated.

Len Yates was a small, slight man, quick in his movements, and with a pair of sly eyes that were never still. A bristle of beard covered his cheeks and chin and one side of his face bulged from a healthy chew. He sat in his kak, hands folded over the horn, eyes constantly darting from Baxter to the horizon and then back to Baxter again. At his hips, Yates wore a pair of tied-down .45s.

Frank Parnell was a short, gross man with a large belly that overflowed the top of his trousers. He was dark and his skin had an oily tint so that he constantly appeared ready to break out in a sweat. His black eyes seemed set deep in thick pouches of fat and they were keen and piercing. Parnell appeared lazy in his movements but this was the deceptive laziness of a prowling puma. The shell belt around his ample waist supported a holstered Remington .44-40.

These two were men worthy of Chamberlain's company, Baxter thought.

Chamberlain had his cigarette built now and he lit it and then exhaled a great cloud of smoke. He had regained his composure by now.

He looked down at the tip of his cigarette and said, almost idly, "I suppose you've heard about Olivera."

"I have."

Chamberlain kept on looking at the smoke in his hand. "How come you're in the Diablos then?"

Baxter said nothing. There really was nothing to say, he thought. In the privacy of his own mind he knew why he was here but it was the kind of reason that went beyond explanation. It was something between him and his heart.

When Baxter did not speak, Chamberlain said, "Don't you know that Olivera is supposed to be up here?"

Baxter stirred, a little irritably, in his saddle. "Mike McCall told me."

"Oh?" said Chamberlain. His head came up and that wary glance rested on Baxter again. "Are you going to join McCall?"

"I'm not joining anybody."

Chamberlain took a deep drag on his smoke and exhaled slowly. He appeared to be thinking of something. After a pause, he said, "You don't make sense, Dan."

"Why don't I?" Anger stirred faintly in Baxter.

Chamberlain lifted his shoulders in a shrug and made a small mouth. "You've got everything to lose and nothing to gain by going it alone." Those eyes grew more cautious than ever. "Just what do you have in mind?"

"Nothing that is any of your business."

Chamberlain flushed again. He started to come up in the stirrups, angry eyes glowering, but then he checked himself. He settled himself back in his kak, his face taut with anger.

"One of these days you're going to go too far, Dan," he said, angrily.

"When I do, you better have your two boys with you. You'll probably need them."

Len Yates spat a curse. His right hand came off the saddlehorn and took up a post next to the handle of a .45. Frank Parnell started to grin. It was the grin of a panther contemplating a kill.

Chamberlain took a deep breath that swelled his chest. It was evident that he was doing his utmost to keep himself under control. "Look, Dan," he said, his voice a little thick from the restrain he was imposing on himself, "I'm not trying to pick a fight with you. You're on edge and I can understand why. When you come to think of it, we're both in the same cavvy. We're both working the same roundup. We both want Olivera dead."

"Who said I want him dead?" asked Baxter.

One brow of Chamberlain's lifted in a display of surprise. "What else would you want him? You know he'll kill you the first chance he gets. Isn't that what you came up here for? To beat him to it?"

Baxter did not answer. The futility of trying to explain came over him again. How could he explain something that was more of a feeling and an intuition than anything else?

Chamberlain went on, "Why don't you throw in with us, Dan? You know the Diablos better than we do. We'll get Olivera for sure then. All I want is for Olivera to be left to me. I want to be the one to put the slug in him that kills him. Or if we take him alive, I want to be the one to whip the horse out from under him when we hang him. Is it a deal?"

Baxter shook his head. "I'm going it alone," he said quietly.

Chamberlain's face darkened with wrath again. He gave a savage wrench to the lines that swung his sorrel up against Baxter's buckskin. "Listen to me, Dan," said Chamberlain, voice trembling with fury, "Olivera's my meat. I mean to get him one way or another. If McCall gets him before I do, I'm taking him away from McCall. I'm the one that's going to kill Olivera," he snarled, smiting himself on the chest. "He killed my brother Billy. I'll get Olivera for that if it's the last thing I ever do on this earth."

"Olivera killed Billy in a fair fight," said Baxter. "Billy started it and Olivera killed him in self-defense. He was acquitted in court. I was sheriff at the time. Don't you remember?"

"I remember," said Chamberlain heavily, "I remember, all right. I remember it was you who kept me from squaring with Olivera. I've remembered that for over five years. I still remember it. So keep out of my way, Dan. If you're not hankering to die, keep out of my way! . . ."

III

The mountains seemed somber and lonely. There was something sinister in all this desolation, in all this waste. The lack of any living thing heightened the feeling of depression that had settled over Baxter. When once he saw a vulture floating up against the sky he welcomed the sight. He was that low right now.

It was after the middle of the day that it abruptly came to Baxter that he was not alone. It came as a crawling sensation that seemed to reach every part of his body. It was the feeling of something malignant and evil and deadly.

He reined in the buckskin and looked around but there was nothing to see except the emptiness of the land. The peaks towered naked and mighty. There was sage and mesquite here on the valley floor and the rising and dipping of the hills. Clumps of jackpine clung to the mountain walls. This was all that he saw but the certainty lived in him that there was more.

He rode the buckskin to the top of a hill. Even though this skylighted him, it gave him a vantage point to scan the country from. He squinted his eyes and studied the land most carefully. It threw its emptiness back at him, mockingly. But he knew something was out there.

He sent the buckskin down the other slope of the hill and then started across the valley. He thought of Mike McCall, and then of Chamberlain and Yates and Parnell, but they would be open about it. They would not trail him on the sly.

That left only Jesse Olivera.

The skin crawled at the back of Baxter's neck. For a few frantic moments, he told himself he had been a fool to have come up here into the Diablos. He should have stayed on his ranch and waited for Olivera to come to him. But Baxter had the feeling that Olivera would never get out of these mountains alive. That was why Baxter had come.

He rode the buckskin to another hilltop and reined in and studied the country once more. Only the inanimateness of the terrain showed. Not even a vulture was in the sky now. Nevertheless, Baxter had the uneasy certainty that something was out there, something that meant him no good.

He rode on. He came to a stretch of ground littered with huge slabs of rock, the monument of some prime-

val upheaval. The earth was hard here, the buckskin left hardly a trace of its passing. Baxter rode through here and then he sent the buckskin up a steep slope. The buckskin worked hard but it got up the slope and here Baxter halted it and dismounted.

He saw where he could climb up to a shelf that would give him a commanding view of the land below. He tied the buckskin to a jackpine and then, taking his Winchester, he climbed up to the shelf. He was quite high here. The undulations of the land stretched out below him.

Baxter stared until his eyes ached and then he stared some more. He thought once that he glimpsed a movement. However, it was so fleeting and infinitesimal that he could not pin it down, not even as to its actuality. It could have been the glinting of the sun off a piece of quartz — or off a blued gun barrel.

He waited with the sun burning down on his back. He waited with sweat trickling down the sides of his face and dripping off his chin. He waited until he was sure no one would come and then he went on waiting.

All the while, he could hear the slow, measured beating of his heart against the ground . . .

He finally came down from the shelf. Mounting his buckskin, he rode off on his search again. He was not yet quite sure what he had in mind. He wanted to find Olivera, that much Baxter knew, but beyond that he was uncertain.

Again the feeling that he was not alone came to Baxter. He could not understand this intuition. It made him uneasy and then it started a slow swirl of wrath building up in him. If he was going to let it get him like this, he should turn around and go home. He knew, however, that he would never do that. The thing was too compelling within him.

He topped a hill and, hipping around in the saddle, gave a look down his backtrail. This time he spied someone. There was no doubt about it. This was real. This was not a figment of his imagination. That was a horseman back there.

A sudden flash of anger darted across Baxter's brain. On the instant, his teeth bared and his hand reached for his Winchester. Then he gave another look and this time he recognized the rider.

It was Mike McCall.

The sheriff rode up with a puzzled frown on his face. He looked Baxter carefully up and down and then McCall frowned again.

"I didn't think I'd see you up here, Dan," the sheriff said.

"Well, I'm here," said Baxter. His tone was hard. He was feeling nettled and mean inside.

McCall shifted his weight a little more comfortably in the kak. His face looked somewhat drawn and tired. A red beard stubble sprinkled his cheeks and throat. His clothing

was soiled with dust and sweat. Baxter supposed he didn't look any better. This matter was a strain on him, also.

McCall raised a hand and scratched the stubble on his chin. His eyes held a pensive glint. "What's on your mind, Dan?"

Baxter showed a brief, mirthless grin. "I'm just out for a ride in the sun."

"Let's not get funny about it," McCall said with a small show of irritation. "For some reason you want Olivera. What is it, Dan?"

"Why should I want Olivera?"

"That's why I'm asking. There's no reason for it. You're not that kind of a man, Dan. It isn't that you've got something to square with the man. It really is the other way around. Yet here you are, riding around for all the world like you're giving Olivera a crack at you. It doesn't make sense."

Baxter said nothing. It was the old impasse again, the old feeling of futility when he tried to put it into words or even rational thought. It was like the dark bottom of a well, which is known to be there but which can't be seen.

McCall's stare was hard and contemplative. "Why do you want to kill Olivera?"

Baxter experienced a flash of resentment. "What makes you think I want to kill him?"

McCall spread his hands. "What other reason would you have for coming up here? You know Olivera will throw down on you the minute he spots you."

Baxter said nothing. He was listening to the dull, heavy beating of his heart. His mind, for a moment, was on a distant memory.

"There's one way I've got it figured out," McCall went on after a pause. "Maybe you don't like to sit around on your hands and wait. Maybe you figure on carrying the fight to Olivera, to catch him off-balance that way. But this still isn't like you, Dan. You're not a killer. You've killed, but only when it couldn't be helped. You've never invited killing but now you are."

Baxter did not speak. He was thinking now of his wife, Penny, and a great longing came over him. It wasn't fair to her, he told himself, but then he put the consideration from him. The thing gnawing at his mind allowed for no such considerations.

McCall sighed. "Olivera will be taken care of, Dan. I won't give up until I've got him. Go on home, won't you?"

"Have you spotted any sign of him?" asked Baxter.

"I was following a set of tracks that were following yours," said McCall, and Baxter felt his heart go cold, "but then they faded out. It was like someone had seen me coming. Olivera's as cunning as an Injun, you know."

"You see anything else?"

"You mean Chamberlain?"

Baxter nodded.

McCall sighed. "I saw George and his boys. They didn't see me though because I spotted them first. I thought it best to keep out of their sight." He directed a sharp glance at Baxter. "You know what will happen to Olivera if they get to him before I do."

"That's why I want to reach Olivera first," said Baxter.

McCall's tone turned grim. "And I want to get to Olivera first because I want to take him alive."

A faint smile crossed Baxter's mouth. "Do you think you can?"

"At least I'll try," said McCall with a trace of anger. "That's more than you and Chamberlain can say."

Baxter did not comment on that. He was thinking of the old memory again and of the thing that had prompted him to come up here. Strange as it was, he almost experienced a kinship with Jesse Olivera. It was as though he were being drawn irresistibly toward the man. This puzzled Baxter more than ever.

McCall was staring at him keenly. After a while, the sheriff said, "How about joining me, Dan?"

Baxter shook his head.

"Then you really mean to kill Olivera?"

"Let's not talk about it any more, Mike," said Baxter tiredly. "You just wouldn't understand . . ."

IV

Baxter sat there in his saddle, watching Sheriff Mike McCall ride away. McCall rode around the shoulder of a hill and was gone from sight and Baxter was alone again. Once more he had only his thoughts for company.

He recalled what McCall had said about following the tracks of someone who had been following Baxter. He had not imagined anything after all. It had really been Olivera on his backtrail. It could have been no one else. The man had been stalking him. Then Olivera had become aware of the presence of McCall and had slipped away.

There could no longer be any doubt that he was here in the Diablos. Olivera also was aware of Baxter's presence and that could portend only one thing. Although this was what he wanted, nevertheless the realization left Baxter rather cold at the pit of his stomach.

Finally, he started the buckskin, taking a direction different from the way Mike McCall had gone. Baxter headed for a notch between two peaks. He stopped often to study his backtrail but now his misgivings seemed without foundation. Nothing out of the way appeared in his backwash. Only the land was there, forsaken and wasted. Even the uneasiness he had experienced earlier that day had vanished. It was as though he were all alone in a great, forgotten universe of his own.

He gained the notch at sundown. He stopped and made another cold, dry camp. Now that Olivera knew he was here in the Diablos, Baxter could risk a fire even less.

He lay awake a long time, staring off into the night. His ears strained for any alien sounds but the only noises he heard were those made by the picketed buckskin. However, this was not particularly reassuring. Olivera would not be making a racket if he were creeping in out of the night.

He did not think only of Olivera, however. He thought also of his wife, Penny. It was now on the second night that he really missed her. A feeling of sadness came over Baxter as he remembered her. If he should die, and the chances were fifty-fifty that he would, it would be a terrible blow to her. It would be practically an inconsolable loss. He began to feel depressed, thinking in this fashion, and angrily he put the thoughts aside.

His mind reverted to Olivera. It stayed with Olivera until he finally dropped off . . .

He awoke with a start, surprised that the sun was up. He came awake with his heart pounding with dread and apprehension and he threw a hard, wary look all around, scanning the country for any doubtful signs, but only the emptiness of the land lay in his gaze.

At first, he felt relieved, and then a great impatience and irritation came over him. Time was passing. If he was to meet Olivera, it had to be soon. The longer it was delayed, the greater became the possibility that Olivera would meet up with Mike McCall or George Chamberlain and his men. A great urgency possessed Baxter now.

He turned around and went back, hoping by this to encounter Olivera should the man have picked up his trail again. He rode quite openly now, taking all the high spots, highlighting himself on the crests of all the hills and ridges for anybody to see who should be watching. But, perversely enough, this produced no results.

It was almost as if he were all alone in the Diablos. As the morning mounted, the peaks seemed to leer at him in evil mockery. The emptiness of the land taunted him. A feeling began to torment him, a feeling of futility and despair. There was nothing for him here, the feeling told him, he was on a fruitless hunt. Olivera was not for him. The old obligation would not be settled. Olivera was meant for either McCall or Chamberlain.

Baxter felt full of anger and frustration. He gnashed his teeth in helpless wrath and cursed feelingly. He was licked, something seemed to tell him needlingly, he might as well quit and go home. It was a foolish impulse that had brought him into the Diablos in the first place.

He was at the lowest point of his spirits when the shots came. On the instant, Baxter froze in his kak. Then he reined in the buckskin sharply and listened. His heart was beating in a hard, quickened way.

The shots had not been directed

at him. They came from ahead of him, they were somewhat weak with distance. McCall? the thought flashed through Baxter's mind. Or Chamberlain? Was he too late? Was Olivera already dead?

Then another flurry of shots came. There was something reassuring about them. Evidently, Olivera was not dead or taken yet.

Baxter sent the buckskin ahead. He was all tense and caught up inside. His heart was hammering with excitement. He knew both elation and dread. He still could not decide what the shooting portended.

He could see the rim of a cliff ahead. The shooting had come from beyond and below this. Baxter dismounted and tied the buckskin to a mesquite bush. He took his Winchester and went ahead, cautiously, on foot.

As he neared the rim, he dropped first to his knees and then to his belly and dragged himself along the ground like that. Two more shots rang out but there seemed to be something desultory and futile in their sound. Baxter was very close to the rim now. His exertions and the excitement had him breathing hard.

Jackpine was scattered along the rim of the cliff which dropped almost precipitously to the floor of a canyon fifty feet below. Baxter took a lot of care so that he would not reveal himself. He had no idea how it was down below and he was taking no unnecessary chances.

He wiggled his way through a small clump of jackpine and this brought him to the lip of the rim. Now he could see below. Breath held fearfully in his throat, he peered cautiously over the edge of the cliff and there he saw it.

Below and a little distance ahead, a man was crouched in the shelter of several slabs of rock. As Baxter watched, the man called out something. The sound of his voice drifted up to Baxter but it was so faint the words were indistinguishable.

The man was Sheriff Mike McCall.

Looking beyond McCall to the other side of this narrow canyon, Baxter saw where another man was forted up among another smattering of boulders. Was this Olivera? Baxter's heart gave a sudden leap. It had to be.

For several moments, Baxter was nagged by indecision. Several alternatives clamored at his brain, each one insisting on its superiority. A trickle of sweat flowed down Baxter's cheeks. A pulse started an insistent throbbing at his temple.

McCall rose up a little behind his rocks for a better look and the man across the canyon got off a shot. The slug glanced off stone and went whining up the canyon. McCall dropped swiftly behind his shelter. He began shouting again. His only reply was another shot from the man who must be Olivera.

This was a standstill, Baxter thought. Each man had the other

pinned down. If Olivera did not want to surrender, this could go on indefinitely. Perhaps Olivera was waiting for nightfall which would afford him a chance to sneak away. This was feasible — provided Olivera was still alive at nightfall.

Baxter thought of George Chamberlain. There was no telling where Chamberlain and Yates and Parnell were. If they should be within hearing distance of the gunfire, they would investigate. If they did that and found Olivera here, he would not live to see the sun go down.

It was this consideration that affirmed Baxter's decision.

Sweat was trickling down into his eyes. Angrily, he brushed it away. His heart beat louder than ever. A sneering voice jeered at him, telling him he was a fool to do it this way. He tried not to listen to it, but it drummed at him, relentlessly.

Baxter could see a black horse across the canyon. The animal appeared to be tied to a manzanita. Evidently, this was Olivera's mount.

Baxter poked his Winchester over the rim of the canyon. With each beat his heart seemed to leap up into his throat. Chillingly, he realized he was gambling with Mike McCall's life. He was gambling that Olivera would select escape rather than the death of the sheriff but this was something Baxter could not know for sure. He could only gamble and find out.

He aimed carefully with the Winchester and then he began to fire. He bounced the slugs off the rocks all around McCall. He saw McCall go down, burrowing flat against the slab to shield himself from the bullets from above.

Baxter kept on firing. He let up once to see how Olivera was reacting and it was with relief that he saw the man racing for his horse. In this interval, McCall poked his rifle above the rock and snapped off a shot but Baxter drove him back to cover with two quick shots off the surface of the stone.

By now, Olivera had mounted. He waved an arm in thanks at the rim of the canyon and then he set spurs to his black. A wry grin twisted Baxter's mouth. There would have been no display of gratitude had Olivera known who it was up here on the rim of the canyon. The black was racing swiftly up the canyon.

Baxter emptied his Winchester and then he drew back from the canyon's lip. Bullets began to snarl up at the spot he had just vacated. He crawled on hands and knees until he was sure he could not be seen from below. Then he jumped to his feet and ran to the buckskin. He was positive he had not been recognized by Mike McCall . . .

V

Baxter made another lonely, fireless camp that night. He chewed on some jerky. That was the extent of his supper. Even had he had a fire, he would not have eaten anything

else. He just didn't have the appetite.

He felt tired and beaten. All this business of being alone, of being obsessed by a drive and urge which was not completely clear even to himself, had him on the verge of an utter surrender. He began to doubt if he could keep up with it. He wanted peace and rest. He longed more than ever for the embrace of Penny, his wife, but the grim realization existed in him that this was something he could not give up. He had to pursue that relentless purpose until he had achieved it — or until it brought him his death.

He dreamed many dreams this night. In one he saw himself as a bloody corpse with Penny weeping heartbrokenly over him. He thought it strange that he could hear her since he was dead. He could not understand how this could be but the sound of her crying was there in his ears — hoarse and anguished and wailing. He came awake with a start, sitting bolt upright, and the sound of crying was still real in his ears even after it dawned on him that he had been dreaming. He listened for a long while before it came to him that there was nothing to listen to.

Afterward, he lay down once more and slept. He went on dreaming, twisted, garbled, fantastic dreams. When morning came and he awoke, he felt as tired and beaten as the night before . . .

He came upon a tiny creek that morning. Here he paused to rest the buckskin and to re-fill his canteen. He bathed his face in the cool water and splashed some on the back of his neck. The water seemed to revive him. Some of the depression left him. He experienced a brief return of verve and eagerness — until he thought of what lay ahead. Then he became grim again.

After the buckskin had drunk its fill and rested, Baxter mounted and rode on. The land was different here. An occasional pine and cedar grew but these were not dwarfs. They were full-sized trees. There was also a little graze but the land was still void of human habitation.

He followed the creek to its source which was a spring issuing from a fissure in a large wall of rock. Here Baxter paused because the ground was high and afforded him a look at the surrounding area. He glanced around carefully and saw nothing. Then he gave a look at the sky and up there he saw the vultures.

The buzzards were gathering. There were half a dozen of them, floating around on wide-spread, motionless wings. As Baxter watched, one of them swooped down, disappearing behind an intervening hill, and failed to appear again. After a while, another one banked and started down.

His heart hammering in fearful expectation, Baxter started the buckskin. He rode up the side of the hill with his heart still beating fast and his breath catching in his throat and

his hand tight about the handle of his gun. He had no idea what he would find. He knew nothing other than an unnerving intuition of death.

When he topped the hill, the vultures rose with a monstrous, foul flapping of wings. Baxter instantly saw the man but from up here he could not tell who it was. Slowly, Baxter sent the buckskin down the slope. He gave a swift search of the surrounding land with wary eyes but beheld nothing. The only living things were him and the buckskin and the vultures wheeling overhead.

The man lay sprawled on his back with his face turned to one side away from Baxter. Olivera, the thought sped through Baxter's mind, but this man was too heavy and stocky to be Olivera unless Olivera had put on a lot of weight in prison. A thing like that, however, was unlikely.

The man's arms were thrown out and one knee was drawn up in a final reflex of agony. Blood stained the front of his shirt. Blood had also poured out of his mouth to stain one side of his face and to form a small, crimson pool on the ground. His mouth was still slacked open and his teeth had a hard, gaunt thrust to them. His wide-open eyes had the blank, intense stare of death.

The dead man was Frank Parnell . . .

There was no way to bury Parnell, and besides a deviling urgency possessed Baxter. He rode the buckskin around, studying the many marks in the ground. He followed tracks over another hill and there he found Parnell's mount, grazing placidly as if unaware of the fate that had overtaken its master.

Baxter scouted around some more, his heart beating in dread now, until he found the tracks of three horses going away. His throat got dry as he read the implication in this.

Chamberlain must have Olivera. That explained the three horses. They must have cornered him here and Olivera had killed Parnell before being taken. He must still be alive or his body would have been left here for the buzzards as Parnell's corpse had been. Chamberlain would have still less feeling for Olivera than for one of his own men.

The realization that he was still possibly alive was not exactly cheering to Baxter. He knew how deeply and thoroughly George Chamberlain could hate. He must have something special in mind for Jesse Olivera.

Heart racing, a need for haste screaming in him, Baxter started out after the tracks. Everything in him shouted for a headlong gallop but caution steadied him. He could not burst upon them unexpectedly. He had to exercise restraint and care.

A needling insistence kept telling him he would be too late. He was tempted time and again to abandon caution and send the buckskin on as fast as the animal could run. But Baxter kept a grip on himself. He

kept the buckskin moving at a trot that ate up the distance.

Parnell had died in open country where there had been no trees. Baxter remembered Chamberlain's words — *I want to be the one to put the slug in him that kills him. I want to be the one to whip the horse out from under him when we hang him* . . . The sense of urgency doubled in Baxter.

The tracks climbed a ridge whose top was studded with pines and cedars. Baxter rode into these, heart apprehensive. He had the feeling that he was nearing the end of his search. These trees were what Chamberlain was seeking. When he found one that suited his purpose, he would stop and there Olivera would die.

Baxter saw where the horses had stopped beside a tall cedar as though this one had been considered. However, the limbs were too close to the ground, and the three had ridden on. Baxter urged the buckskin on a trifle faster.

He peered ahead, trying to see around and beyond the scattered trees, he stared until his eyes began to ache. The need for haste started a sense of despair in him. He tried not to think of it, he told himself he would be in time but he could not quite convince his heart.

Suddenly through the avenues of the trees, he caught a glimpse of something ahead. Abruptly, he reined in the buckskin. However, he could not see well enough, he knew only that something was up there, and, after a short hesitation, he started the buckskin again, but very cautiously this time.

As he advanced, he made out a clearing. To one side in the clearing, stood a majestic pine. Its trunk was immense, its lowest limbs were high enough for a horse and rider to easily pass underneath. This was the tree that George Chamberlain had been looking for.

It was easier than Baxter had dared to hope. However, he could understand why it was like this. Chamberlain and Yates were so intent on what they were doing and they were so confident of being alone, that they concentrated only on the job at hand.

Contrary to Chamberlain's words of the other day, he was not going to whip a horse from under Olivera. Chamberlain must have considered the matter more thoroughly. He had come up with a much slower and more painful death, although hanging was still the name for it.

There was not much time, Baxter thought, as he circled the edge of the clearing so that he could come in behind Chamberlain and Yates. He moved as fast as he dared. He hoped the buckskin would not make any sudden, sharp noise to warn Chamberlain.

Olivera was not on a horse. He stood on the ground with his hands bound behind his back. A noose was around his neck and the rope had been passed over a limb and the

other end of the rope was dallied around Chamberlain's saddlehorn. There was to be no sudden drop, no snapping of the neck. Chamberlain's intent was clear. He would send his horse ahead, just enough to lift Olivera's toes off the ground. A slow, painful strangulation was what Chamberlain had in mind.

Baxter could hear the hard, sharp thumping of his heart. It sounded so loud that he was sure Chamberlain and Yates could hear it. Baxter's .44 was in his hand as he rode out of the trees. In Baxter's ears, Chamberlain's wrathful, hate-ridden words raged.

"How do you like it, Olivera?" Chamberlain was saying as he kneed his horse ahead a little, tightening the rope so that the noose dug into the doomed man's neck. "How do you like the feel of it? Can't you tell me? Can't you talk? Well, then, maybe you can tell Billy when you see him in hell. Will you tell him I sent you there, Olivera? It won't be fast but you'll be in hell soon enough."

Len Yates sat on his horse beside Chamberlain. Yates was watching with an avid, enthralled fascination. Neither man was aware of Baxter coming up behind them. Chamberlain moved his horse a little more and Olivera strained up on his toes, his face contorting. Yates' laugh was soft and evil.

A wrath, immense and overwhelming, swept over Baxter. He experienced a sudden, heedless urge to open up with his .44, to cut down Chamberlain and Yates without warning. But a thing like this was not in Baxter's nature, no matter how much he hated the man.

The click as he cocked his .44 was a soft but perceptible sound. Despite their pre-occupation, both Chamberlain and Yates heard it. They froze in their kaks, their heads thrust up, stiff with alarm.

"Let that rope go, George," Baxter said quietly.

He heard the sharp inhalation as Chamberlain recogized him. Yates whirled his horse to face Baxter. Yates' right hand was on the ivory handle of one gun. His eyes were hard and his face was like an iron mask.

Chamberlain spoke. He still had his back to Baxter and Olivera was still up on his toes, fighting for breath. "Keep out of this, Dan," said Chamberlain, voice thick with wrath. "I'm warning you. Keep out of this."

"I said let that rope go," snapped Baxter.

Yates started to edge his horse to the side. Baxter swung his gun to cover the fellow. "Hold it, Yates," he growled. "Hold it if you don't want a slug in your belly!"

"Don't listen to him, Len," said Chamberlain, a jeer in his tone. "He's only bluffing. He won't shoot to save a dirty rustler and sneaking killer. Don't let him bluff you."

"Does this look like a bluff?" said Baxter. He swung his .44 back and

fired. The bullet whipped Chamberlain's hat from his head. He emitted a shout of alarm and his hand inadvertently released the rope and grabbed for his gun. The dally slipped off the horn and Olivera dropped to his knees.

Len Yates took this opportunity to draw his gun. Baxter saw it come and he swung his .44 back and fired. The slug slammed Yates in the chest. A hurt groan ripped out of his throat and at this moment his horse shied and Yates went pitching out of his saddle.

Chamberlain had his gun out now. Baxter jabbed the buckskin with the spurs and the horse leaped ahead just as Chamberlain fired. The bullet made a wailing whine past Baxter's ear. He was crouched low in the saddle, his .44 thrust out ahead of him. He thumbed off a shot and then another one, swiftly. The first slug took Chamberlain in the breast, the second one drilled his neck. He began to make harsh, garbled sounds, clawing all the while at his throat, and then a great gush of blood burst out of his mouth and he plunged headlong to the ground . . .

VI

Baxter dismounted. His knees felt weak and shaky and there was a fluttering in his stomach but the sensation passed quickly enough. He examined Yates and Chamberlain. Both men were dead.

Baxter punched the spent shells from his .44 and inserted fresh cartridges. Then he holstered the weapon and walked over to Olivera who was leaning with his back against the trunk of the pine. His hands were still bound behind his back and the noose was still around his neck, but the pressure was gone from it.

Prison had not gone well with Olivera, Baxter thought. The man was gaunt. His cheeks were sunken and his dark skin had a sickly tinge to it. There were streaks of gray in his black hair. Only the eyes burned with the same intensity of the old days.

Olivera stood there, legs spread a little, his chest rising and falling as he stared at Baxter. The hate was still in Olivera's eyes but there seemed to be something else, something like puzzlement.

Baxter drew a deep breath. "I want you to listen to me, Olivera," he said. "I'm going to turn you loose but first I want to tell you this. I know what you've got on your mind and I don't blame you. But I would like to be your friend. I realize that is quite impossible but still I would like to be. The years have not been pleasant for me, either, amigo, but I know they were as nothing compared to what yours must have been. That is why I came to you. I owe it to you, Olivera. You are free to do as you wish."

He took out his knife and cut the thongs about Olivera's wrists, then stepped back. Olivera began to rub his wrists, his eyes all the while studying Baxter. Olivera did not

stir for a while. He did not speak for some time.

Then he said, "Why did you do this?"

"I told you, I owe it to you."

"You know I have sworn to kill you?"

Baxter nodded.

"You saved my life," said Olivera, "and that puts me under an obligation to you but there is still another life to be settled for. It is what I have broken out of prison for. It is the one thing that kept me alive for prison does not exactly agree with me, hombre. I do not want to seem ungrateful but I swore an oath. In my Maria's blood I swore it. You have a gun and I am unarmed. You had better kill me right now, Baxter."

"If a gun is what you wish to have, you will find one over there," said Baxter, indicating the bodies of Chamberlain and Yates.

Olivera peered at him a moment, hard, as though trying to see inside Baxter's brain. Then he strode over to Chamberlain's body. With the toe of his boot, Olivera rolled the man over. There was a sixshooter thrust into Chamberlain's waist. Olivera bent down and took the gun.

He straightened with the weapon in his hand. Baxter's .44 was still in its holster. Baxter's heart skipped a beat as he watched Olivera. The man stood there, fondling the gun, struggling with something in his mind. His teeth showed once in the beginning of a ferine snarl. Then, abruptly, he slipped the gun into the holster at his side.

"I have never killed a man in cold blood," said Olivera. "Not even for my Maria could I do it."

"Thank you, amigo," said Baxter.

"We are even then?" asked Olivera. "I have just given you your life like you gave me mine. There is nothing between us any more?"

"Nothing," said Baxter, tensing.

"Bueno," said Olivera.

He went into a crouch. Baxter watched him with slitted eyes. His heart gave a violent leap, then was cold again. This was the time for it, Baxter thought, this was what he had come into the Diablos for. This was what he owed to Olivera. He realized that there was a good chance he would die but there was no regret in Baxter. This was the code he lived by.

He saw Olivera begin his draw. Baxter pulled his .44 with all the speed he possessed. He saw Olivera's gun whip up, the big bore gaped at him, he saw flame spurt out of it but his .44 had already roared. Something whined past his head and then Olivera was buckling.

The man went down to his knees. It looked like he was going to topple over but he recovered at the last instant. His head lifted and he started to bring his gun up again, but when he had it level it began to shake violently. Then it dropped from his fingers, unfired, and Olivera fell on his side.

He had rolled over on his back when Baxter came up and knelt beside him. The blood was pumping out of the wound in Olivera's chest. His face held the color of death. He looked up at Baxter and smiled a little.

"You are the only real man I have ever known, amigo," said Olivera. "Will you give me your hand before I die?"

Weakly, Olivera lifted a hand and Baxter took it. He squeezed it a little and Olivera smiled again. "Thank you, amigo," he whispered, and died . . .

Mike McCall heard the shooting and he rode up soon after that. He took one look at Baxter's face and decided against talking. Without a word, they lifted the bodies across the saddles of the mounts they had ridden. Only after this was done did the sheriff speak.

"You want to tell me anything, Dan?"

"I owed it to him," said Baxter. "It was the only thing that kept him alive in the pen. He did not care to live without his Maria. It was only a question of time before he died. I owed him a crack at me. He could have killed me if he'd wanted to but he was too much of a man for that."

McCall took another look of Baxter's face. "I think I understand," he said. He put an arm briefly on Baxter's shoulder. "Shall we go, Dan? Shall we go home?"

"Sure," said Baxter, thinking of Penny. He felt free. For the first time in five years he felt really free. "Let's go . . ."

GUNSMOKE'S

Movie of the Month:

Starring

ALAN LADD
JEAN ARTHUR
VAN HEFLIN
BRANDON DE WILDE

A stranger crosses the Starrett homestead, passing through on his way north. But when he finds a ruthless cattle empire forcing Starrett and the rest of the homesteaders to sell out, he decides to stay and help them fight. Starrett's wife and boy take to the stranger immediately, and Starrett himself defends the newcomer against a charge of cowardice when he refuses to fight one of the cattlemen in a barroom argument. Then a homesteader is killed. The rest are frightened and ready to leave. The stranger stops them. He goes to fight the cattle boss, alone — knowing he can never come back, because he's fallen in love with Starrett's wife. And the stranger walks straight into the trap baited for Starrett . . .

Directed by George Stevens (A PLACE IN THE SUN), with a screen-play by Pulitzer Prize winner A. B. Guthrie based on the novel by Jack Schaefer (both, incidentally, *Gunsmoke* contributors), SHANE is a suspenseful, action-packed film in the great tradition of adult Westerns. *Gunsmoke* is proud to select it as its Movie Of The Month.

Heister had the feed the other cattlemen needed. But he had to look out for himself first, didn't he?

BY STEVE FRAZEE

The Big

With the warmth of the fireplace pressing against his back, Jim Heister looked east along the snowfields and saw them coming. They rode through the drifts like men with defeat upon them, and that could make them savage. Six of them. There might have been twelve, but some of the Great Park ranchers were too full of pride and some of them hated Heister too much to come begging.

He was a lean, tall man with a look of hard-sharp assurance on his snow-burned features. He stood in the warmth of what was his and watched the snow trail away in streamers from the legs of the laboring horses that were carrying men to Whispering Pines on a futile mission.

His pistol hung in its holster on a peg near the door. He glanced at it and he looked again at the stubborn way the ranchers came on, with their heads lowered against the wind, with the white breath of the horses whipping away. This had been the hardest winter the Great Park country had ever known, and no man could guess when spring would arrive.

Fred Beckett came from the kitchen, an old man bumping along on run-over heels. His full lower lip made a red streak against gray beard stubble. His face was rutted, his eyes reserved. He had wanted little from life and that was what he had got, a horse, a saddle, a good pistol and a place to work. It was hard to understand a man like that; but Heister was glad now that he had not put on his pistol.

Beckett said, "Company coming."

"I'm looking at them."

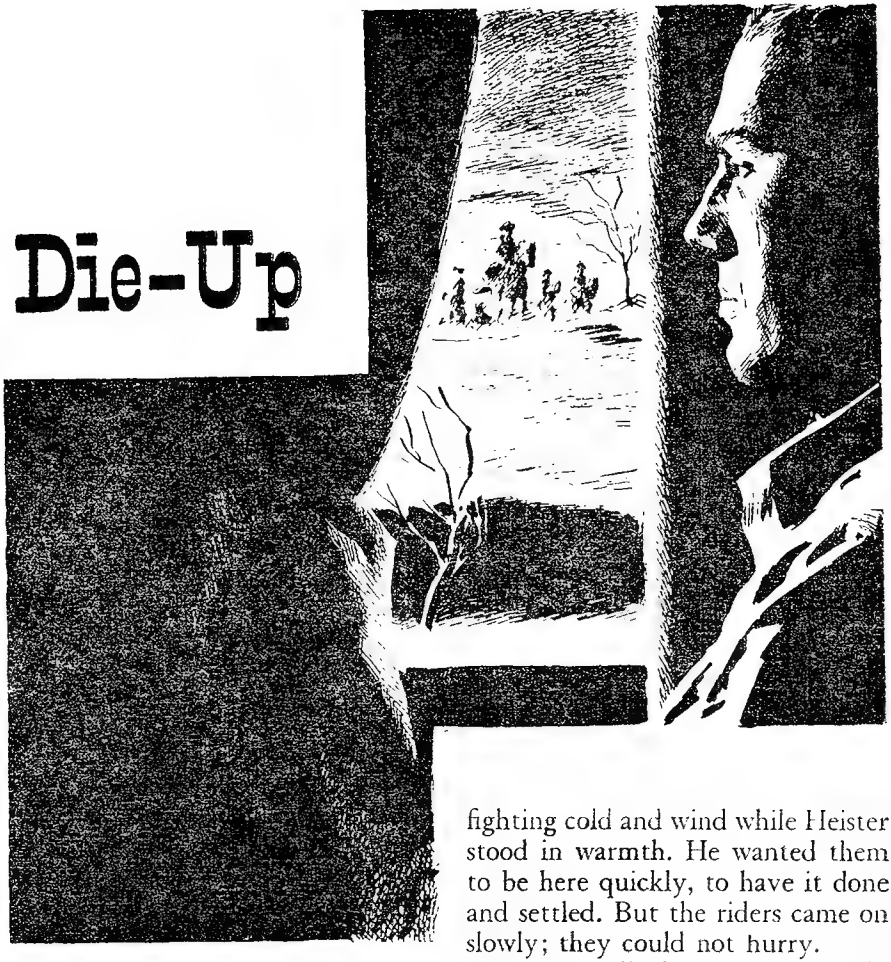
"Yeah." Beckett spat into the fireplace. "So you are." He turned around and started back to the kitchen. His brief presence and his leaving spoke of a complete understanding and a great gulf.

Nettled, Heister said, "Fred, you think I'm wrong, don't you?"

Beckett looked across his shoulder. His lower lip might have been a pout if his seamed, brown face had not been so cold. "I know you are." He clumped on out of the room.

Heister glanced again at his pistol and then he looked at the riders struggling through the drifts. He

Die-Up



couldn't question Beckett's loyalty. The man thought one thing and was blunt in saying so, and yet he would stand solidly beside Heister if there was need.

There was a disturbing edge in the thought, just as there was something mildly painful in watching men fighting cold and wind while Heister stood in warmth. He wanted them to be here quickly, to have it done and settled. But the riders came on slowly; they could not hurry.

Heister walked out on the porch. His woodpile was still as large as some ranchers had laid in for the entire winter. You expected the worst and prepared for it. If you got less, that was a dividend. The long sheds in the west field were full of cattle. The sides of Heister's haystacks showed dark against the land. Some of those snow-rounded stacks

had been there three winters, when there was no need for them. As usual, Heister had cleaned out in the fall, selling stuff that other ranchers carried over until the next summer. His herd now numbered less than one quarter of the number owned by the smallest rancher in the Park.

The difference was: when spring came, if it ever did, there would be no winter loss at Whispering Pines.

They came into the yard, the horses stamping at the velvety whiteness, blowing past the rime around their muzzles. Several of the ranchers were wearing skull caps under their hats. Walter Sexton had a woolen shawl wrapped over his hat and knotted under his chin. His big red nose, with a drop of moisture on the tip, jutted out fiercely.

He looked like a frozen monk.

"Run your horses in the barn and come inside, boys."

"Maybe later," Sexton said. The ranchers looked to him; he was the spokesman. He was a genial man, brawny, wasteful of effort in his work but he had plenty of stamina to give. He was always the loudest man, the stoutest worker at a house raising. Now his face was set with cold and he was not happy in his role.

"We got it from Dinnie Myers that you don't care to sell any of your hay," Sexton said.

"That's right." Heister said it and then he watched the cold run deeper into Sexton's face and he wondered how Alinor Sexton would have taken his answer; but that was a problem he would have to meet later.

Some of the ranchers looked out at Heister's stacks and then they looked at each other. Brent Fulgham said, "You know what's happening to us, don't you?" It was an accusation and a challenge.

"I don't control the weather, Brent."

"By God, Heister —" Fulgham's temper was at once as brittle as the cold but Sexton cut him off with a wave of his hand and quick words.

"We ain't here to argue." Sexton removed one of his ragged woolen gloves and thrust his hand under the edge of the saddle blanket. "We got to have hay and you know it, Heister. You've got stacks out there three years old. You can't feed it up before spring."

"You think I can't? When is spring anyway? Two more months of this and I'll be scraping my stack yards."

"You know damned well we won't get two more months of winter!" Fulgham said.

"Winter wasn't supposed to start in September." Heister felt the needles of the cold spiking through his heavy shirt and underwear. "Come inside."

Sexton started to answer but Fulgham cut in. "All right, you want to hold us up. What's your price?"

Heister shook his head. "It's not money. I'm taking care of myself.

When the weather starts to break you can have hay."

"Not money, huh?" Fulgham's eyes narrowed.

The sides of Frank Eggleston's neck were red from rubbing against the crusted edges of his sheepskin collar. His broad face bulged with anger. "We can't wait for a break in the weather, Heister. A chinook right now wouldn't be soon enough. How much for your hay?"

"It's more than that," Fulgham said. "By God, he's figuring to get land cheap by starving us out!"

"Now, now, Brent," Sexton said. He stared at Heister, troubled, trying mightily to summon reason and fairness.

"I don't want your land," Heister said. "And I don't want your money. When the weather breaks you can have all the hay you need at ten dollars a ton."

"You know that'll be too late." Sexton's doubt was hardening.

Cold and angry they bore their weight in silence against the man on the porch. The wind whisked snow around the corner of the house.

"Too late," Sexton said. "We need hay now." He looked toward the stacks.

"I'm taking care of my cattle first."

"Of all the stinking, lousy squeeze plays!" Fulgham pulled off his right mitten. He began to unbutton his mackinaw. "If you was wearing a pistol, Heister —"

"I can get one."

"You damned fools!" Sexton yelled. "Stop that kind of talk right now!"

For the first time the desperation of the ranchers struck Heister with full force. He saw their bitterness. He saw the willingness of at least half of them to spin this moment into him. The knowledge angered him unreasonably. They thought he was deliberately trying to wreck them. They were improvident. They had taken long chances when he took the short, safe way. Now they were willing to drag him into ruin with them because they had been shortsighted.

He laid his anger on all of them. "Not one of you here has as little meadowland as me. Every one of you has made four times the money I have. For years we've had open winters when you laughed at me for selling short and adding to my haystacks. Now you've got your tails in a crack and you want me to risk everything I've got to help you out."

"You like that, don't you? You're damned well pleased about it." Fulgham's voice had a ragged, grating sound.

Heister liked the situation no more than they did and they should have known it. He said, "I didn't order the weather, boys. I've told you the best I can do."

Brent Fulgham drew a pistol from under his mackinaw. He cocked with trembling fingers.

"Put that away!" Sexton cried.

Fulgham swung his horse close in to the porch. "By God, we're going to have an understanding, Heister!"

"You've already had it, Fulgham." Beckett was at the corner of the house with a rifle resting on a log. His weathered face was deadly with blankness.

Heister looked steadily at Fulgham and he saw the wildness seep from the man's expression, leaving only desperation; and then that too faded away and left the marks of bitter defeat. Fulgham put his pistol away. He turned his tired horse and started the long ride back on a trail where the tracks were already nearly drifted over.

In a curiously puzzled voice Sexton said, "I know you don't *want* to see us ruined, Jim, but —"

"I can't take care of the whole park."

"Yeah." Eggleston looked bleakly at the haystacks, at the low sheds.

"I've got to think of myself," Heister said.

"Yeah," Eggleston said heavily. "We see that." Snow crust had cut the legs of his buckskin gelding on the way here. Now the bright blood was frozen in beads on the pale hair. He turned the horse and started after Fulgham.

"You don't really mean . . ." Sexton, like any easy-going man, could summon terrible, short-lived anger on occasions. He seemed to be headed that way now. There was a white frost spot on his cheek. He probed against the numbness for a moment, staring at Heister, and then he rode away.

Neighbors, Heister thought bitterly. *Neighbors, friends until a real test came, and then they got sore because he refused to be dragged under with them.*

He went inside. Beckett was dumping wood into the box behind the kitchen range. He banged the stove lids. Heister heard him grinding coffee. Chilled and shaking from cold that seemed to have settled in his spine, Heister stood with his back to the fireplace. The riders were going slowly. The wind had veered and now it was coming against their right flank, rolling scud across the snowfields. It was six miles to Sexton's place, the nearest shelter.

The stubborn fools could have warmed themselves and eaten before they left. After a while Heister said, "How's the coffee coming, Fred?"

"All right."

They sat at the oilcloth-covered table. Beckett was silent, looking at the curves of snow caught in the corners of the window panes, a grizzled man making his disapproval heavy.

At last Heister said irritably, "You could have let him shoot."

"Yeah, I could have." Beckett glance was hard, direct.

"I haven't got the hay to save the whole park."

"No," Beckett said.

"To save even enough breeding stuff to start their herds again might

use enough of my hay to put me under with the rest of them."

"Yeah, it just might."

"When do you figure the weather will break, Fred?"

"A man's a damn fool to guess." Beckett got out a deck of cards and began to play solitaire.

The air was still crackling when they fed the cattle the next morning after breakfast, forking the long, crisp native hay along the trampled places near the low sheds. Afterward Heister looked at his stacks, sparkling with the wind-driven frost, and then he looked across the long land where there were no fences.

They went back to the house. There was nothing to do until late afternoon when they would have to break ice in the creek again. The warmth of the house and Beckett's silence made Heister irritable. He was on the verge of telling Beckett that he didn't have to stay here if he didn't like it.

But Beckett was a good man. He got along with the summer crew better than Heister. Besides, he was an old man and had no place to go. Then, how could he have so much pride, a sure pride too, not the touchiness of an attitude falsely held. He had nothing and he didn't care, and yet he was a man respected. It was damned odd.

Beckett sprawled in a chair by the fireplace, reading a soiled magazine. Whatever satisfaction he had taken from life would not suffice for Heister. Fred Beckett was a living example of what Jim Heister did not want to be at sixty. A few fool deals like listening to Sexton and the others would fix a man so that he would wind up with nothing.

Heister kept studying the old man until he hated the sight of him.

"I think I'll go to town, Fred. What do we need?"

"Nothing."

Heister's sorrel humped when the blanket touched its back. It bucked down the yard and all the way to the first deep drift. After that it settled down. The sounds of hungry cattle came a long way across the snow from the Sexton place. Heister saw that Sexton had put boards on top of the wire around his last haystack. Five hundred cattle were milling there, bawling their hunger, pawing down through the layers of crust to the frozen earth.

In Sexton's east fields was more than enough hay to have carried them through but it was all uncut and under three feet of snow now. Heister rode into the yard. He knew he was not welcome and so he sat his horse and called out. Sexton came out of the barn, kicking away the snow that piled up in front of the door when he tried to close it.

"What do you want, Heister?"

"I want to talk to you about that hay."

After a time Sexton said, "Put your horse in here." He opened the door of the barn. It was warm inside, or so it seemed once the wind was

cut off. "Let's go to the house," Sexton said.

"In a minute." Heister walked past the stalls and looked outside at the corrals. There was a whiteface [illegible] n one and ten heifers in another.

[illegible] it all you figure you can save of the new stuff you bought last fall?"

"About," Sexton said glumly.

"I can give you the hay to save your Herefords, at least."

Sexton nodded. "Uh-huh."

"Don't you want it?"

"Let's go to the house."

There were six girls in the family. Alinor was the oldest, tall and dark, with a direct way of sizing up the thoughts behind a man's words. The cool civility of her greeting was a sharp change from the last time she and Heister had been together. All the girls but she left the kitchen when Mrs. Sexton nodded them out.

Mrs. Sexton poured coffee. "A steak, Jim?" she asked. "That's one thing we're like to have plenty of before the winter's over." She gave him a speculative look.

Heister shook his head, aware that the sounds of the hungry cattle had never ceased. He said, "I think I've got the hay to save your Herefords, Sexton."

Sexton sipped his coffee. His expression lightened instantly and then the trouble clouded into his eyes again. "That would be a big help. Anyway you figure it, all of us are going to lose so heavy that it will be like starting over again when summer comes."

Alinor stood by the stove, her expression grave, considering. She acted, Heister thought, like both he and Sexton were on trial.

"Of course, if I could save the new stuff I bought last fall, or even a good part of it . . ." Sexton was musing without any sureness in his voice. He looked at his wife and stopped, swinging his gaze then to Alinor.

"We're all neighbors in this park," the girl said.

"I can't take care of everybody." Heister realized that he was suddenly on the defensive.

"You could try. You could make it a little easier," Alinor said.

"I could ruin myself too." His next words were for Sexton but he kept looking at the girl. "Shall we figure to try to save as many of your Herefords as we can?"

Sexton pushed his coffee away. His wife was watching him. His daughter was weighing him. He spoke slowly. "I guess maybe I'll just ride along with the others, Heister, but I'm obliged to you for the offer."

"You're in deep with that new stock, Sexton."

"Yeah." Sexton nodded. All at once he was no longer doubtful or troubled. "I guess I am, but there will be summer again. The land will be here and we all will know things we didn't allow before. I reckon I'll pray for a chinook. If we don't get it I'll still see greenup time with just as much, or maybe more, than before."

Heister heard the bawling cattle. He heard the wind rasping dry snow across the roof. He pictured the situation in the entire park and he knew how far he stood apart from men at the moment. There was a solidarity in this room now, a wall set against him.

Mrs. Sexton smiled and touched her husband's shoulder lightly as she passed him on her way into the living room. Sexton rose. "I guess we'll make it, one way or another," he said, as cheerfully as if the range were not snow-locked. "I'll see you, Jim." He put on his coat and went out.

In the living room Mrs. Sexton and her daughters began to talk of new spring dresses. The mournful voices of the starving brutes in the field went on and on. There was something here as strange and difficult to understand as old Fred Beckett.

Heister looked hard at Alinor. "When I was a kid my father ran a little store. He gave everyone credit. He went broke, still bragging about how honest people were. They would pay up if they could, he always said. He took up a little ranch and he tried to help everyone that came along. He wound up with nothing. I said I'd never do that, Alinor, and I won't."

Alinor watched him thoughtfully. "More coffee, Jim?"

"He didn't have anything. I can't forget that."

"Was he a happy man?"

"Why, I suppose he was, but he wasn't practical."

Alinor nodded. "The world is full of practical men." She began to gather up the cups and saucers.

Sexton was harnessing a team when Heister went to get his sorrel. "You're foolish if you don't take up my offer, Sexton."

"I guess so, Jim. I was about ready to jump at it until Alinor said we're all neighbors here. I'm like most men, I suppose, wanting to win when everybody else wins and silly enough to want to lose when everybody else loses." Sexton grinned. "Just one of the herd, Jim."

When Heister rode away from the shelter of the buildings, Sexton's two hands were going toward the creek with shovels. They would try to dig down where the wind had thinned the snow in pockets, grubbing for frozen grasses. The bawling of the cattle was a death dirge. Drags and shovels and a hundred men could not do now what should have been done last fall.

Heister turned toward home, but after a hundred yards he knew he was in no mood to face Beckett's silence.

He went instead toward Park City, with the wind in his face. When the noise of Sexton's herd died away the same sounds came down the wind from Frank Eggleston's place. Eggleston was worse off than Sexton because he had more cattle. The fences were down around his stackyards and the snow had blown

over them. His cattle were on the ice of the creek, fighting to get the overhanging grasses along the banks. Some of them were already white-covered lumps on the ice.

Heister rode on past. The buildings had a lonely, deserted appearance but smoke was coming from the stovepipes, laying down the wind in gray streamers.

Far away against the hills where the forage was still plentiful beneath the snow the buildings at Brent Fulgham's place were huddled together in the ghostly distance.

They were idiots, all of the ranchers. They could have had hay to burn this winter but they had been taken in by long years of mild weather, laughing at Heister's caution. Security. That was the rule by which Heister lived. If he had had too much of anything he had always been nagged by a fear that extraordinary circumstances could snatch everything from him in an instant.

The trough at the end of the livery stable was a block of ice. The pump was frozen, its spout choked with a blue icicle. Heister hailed the place. It took him and Dinnie Myers, one inside and one outside, to slide the door open against the wind that bound the rollers in their guides.

"I was going to Arizona, I said." Myers removed Heister's saddle and shook the snow from it. "I said it but here I am." He was a rangy young blond man, a daring rider, a careless man who had never wanted much of anything except Alinor Sexton, and that had been broken up a year ago when Heister got into the running.

Heister stamped his feet and rolled his shoulders. "We both should have gone to Arizona." He liked Dinnie Myers better than any man he had ever known, in spite of the fact that he deplored the man's lack of ambition. Five years younger than Heister, Dinnie could have owned a small ranch in the park if he had set his will toward it; but here he was working in a livery stable, waiting for spring.

Together they took care of the sorrel. It was a relief to Heister to be away from hostility and with a friend. "How about a drink or two and some grub, Dinnie?"

"That suits me. Business ain't rushing by no means."

They were going toward the Golden Eagle, thrusting their shoulders against the wind, when Myers asked, "What sort of deal did you work out with the others over the hay?"

"None at all. I told you last month how I felt about that."

"That was last month."

"I haven't changed my mind," Heister said.

"You can't afford not to change your mind. The park is in a hell of a fix."

"I don't control the weather."

"No, but you control the hay."

"You're putting the wrong twist on things, Dinnie. I've had enough hay talk for one day."

They broke into the stifling heat of the saloon. Some of the townsmen were playing checkers near the stove. Brad Edwards, the owner, was behind the bar. "Well! The wind can blow in anything these days!"

"What do you mean by that?" Heister asked, and he knew that he was bristling over nothing.

Edwards gave him a sharp look. "Forget it."

Myers fiddled around with his glass and then he took the drink at a gulp. "How did Sexton take it?"

"You mean Alinor?"

"All right, Alinor then." Myers' gaze was as tough as Heister's.

"I offered Walt hay to tide over his Herefords. He was about to take me up on it and then Alinor changed his mind."

"Good for her."

Heister put his glass down slowly. "What's sticking in your craw, Dinnie?"

"Hay." Everything between them was changed by the simple word.

"How many cows do you own, Dinnie?"

"How many friends do you have now?"

"You talk mighty funny for a man who never lit anywhere for more than a few months at a time."

Myers said, "You mean for a man who ain't cornered all the hay in the country. Sure, Jim, I'm a rider for somebody else. Maybe I like it. No responsibility, no worries. But if I ever got around to being a rancher, I'd be one. I'd take on the obligations that go with the name."

"So?" Heister poured himself another drink. "You'd give your hay away, is that it?"

"No. I'd give my friendship. You can call it hay if you want to. It's a funny thing — you've never been small and mean in any little thing, so I can't understand how you'd be that way when the chips are all in the middle of the table."

Heister's anger was the slow-burning kind that had been mounting steadily since yesterday. He said carefully, "A man with no chips in the game can always tell someone else how to play."

Myers was an even-tempered man and the two of them were friends. Myers could have shrugged it off or blunted it with a quip but he looked at Heister for a long moment and said, "When you made an offer to Sexton that you refused everybody else you were trying to buy Alinor. What kind of woman did you think she was, Jim?"

It was a cold-blooded thrust that struck home. "Anything else?" Heister asked.

"Yes," Myers said. He poured a drink. "This." He threw the whiskey in Heister's face. Somewhere from beyond the red-streaked agony of blindness Myers' voice came coolly. "I'll get a pistol, Jim. I'll meet you in the street outside in a half hour."

The wind played in the street, piling curving slopes against doorways. A few men passed quickly,

with their heads pulled low into their coat collars. There were three or four more men in the Golden Eagle now, silent, waiting. The word was around. Heister waited at the end of the bar. He did not want to go ahead and he could not back out. The world had gone to hell all of a sudden.

Oddly, it was the quick loss of Myers' friendship that was the sharpest bite of all. Beckett and Sexton and Myers had been his friends. They held something in common now that was lost to him. It was Heister's loss alone and he knew it. What had been all-important an hour before was submerged now under the realization that he must go into the street in a few minutes and try to kill his best friend.

He watched the street. The silence of the men at his back kept pushing him.

A large part of Myers' hasty action must be because of Alinor; and some of it because friendship had turned to disgust. A man who had no material stake in any of the park had set himself up to act for the whole country. Heister kept asking himself why.

He guessed that the answer must be that Beckett and Myers, owning nothing, were more a part of the land than he was, with the roots of their thinking twisted deep into the customs of the country. They were neighbors. They were men reaching their friendship toward each other, even with nothing else to give.

All this could be true but it did not alter the fact that Heister must go into the street soon to face Dinnie Myers. That too was a custom of the country. A half hour passed. Myers was not afraid; he would show up. Looking back, Heister could not justify any part of the causes that had led to this.

Another ten minutes ground away, and by then everyone in the saloon was at the windows. Heister pulled his hat on tight and stepped out. At once the cold dug hard into him. There was cold like this over every inch of the park, and dying cattle, and worried men. He was alone in the street. He was alone in the world.

After a while he kicked through the snow and went to the side door of the livery stable. He touched the butt of his pistol. He kicked against the door. "Dinnie!" No answer came. He pushed the door open and stepped into the gloom, sliding quickly to one side. "Dinnie!"

"Yeah?" Myers' voice came from the dimness halfway down the building, and after a time Heister saw him standing there leaning on a pitchfork.

"You weren't — You didn't intend to —" Heister said.

"Of course not, you damned fool. Don't you know a man's hands would stick to a pistol outside in this weather? Besides, I sold my pistol two months ago."

Heister's relief was like a stabbing pain that ends suddenly. He walked

down to Myers. The man had taken a long, wild gamble, basing everything on an understanding of Heister that the latter was just now realizing of himself. Without faith, without friendship, there was nothing.

"I — I've changed my mind about the hay," Heister said. "We'll gamble it against a break in the weather inside of three weeks. If we miss . . ." He shrugged. For the first time in months he felt truly satisfied.

"It's no gamble," Myers said. "It's the thing you had to do. I knew you would if you got jarred a little."

Two abreast the cattle came through the drifts, following the trail broken by horses. There were brands from every ranch in the park. The long line was only about fifteen per cent of the stuff from twelve outfits. By agreement of everyone that was all there was a chance to save, and maybe most of that would go.

But there was hope and there was a oneness in the effort. With their faces blue from cold the riders pushed the herd along until the brutes broke on ahead of their own accord, running toward the hay Fred Beckett had spread near the sheds in Heister's west field.

Fulgham rode up beside Heister. "I was out of my head that day, Jim."

"So was I." There was no security, Heister thought, unless it was the security of all. Neighbors. There was a powerful word when you came to appreciate it.

Fred Beckett was coming toward a stackyard with a hayrack. His Scotch cap was turned down over his ears. His full underlip was a streak in his gray beard stubble. He looked at the blowing snow and rubbed his dripping nose on the sleeve of his coat. His face was expressionless, almost, when he looked at Heister. "Ain't this a beautiful day?"

Heister nodded. "Never expect to see a better one, Fred."

MOSTLY you couldn't tell it, but Zoe was half Sioux, and after Clay was born it cropped out strong. She made a cradleboard to keep him in, sang him Sioux lullabies, and talked a lot about her mother's people. She was homesick for the reservation and anxious to show off her baby, so in July, at treaty time, I left Bates O'Leary to run the outfit, loaded a spring wagon, and took my family over there.

Treaty time was big doings for the Sioux. The tribe had come into the agency for rations and Zoe's grandfather, old Many Wounds, was there with all his people. Indians are as strong on relatives as Texas folks. They made us welcome; we pitched our tent among their tepees and set in to stay a week.

Many Wounds was crowding seventy but his hair was still black and he still had his teeth. He liked me and he liked Zoe, but he was just foolish about Clay. His great-grandson was extra-special and as the week stretched out I could tell that Many Wounds was up to something. I talked no Sioux and Zoe wouldn't say, but the last day of our visit she roused early and diked herself out in shawl and ribbons until she looked just like a squaw.

"Hurry, Jebs," she said while I was eating. "Grandfather will do a big thing today. Hurry and get the horses!"

I asked what Many Wounds was planning but all Zoe said was, "You'll see," so I went for the horses. We

Zoe's grandfather was a Sioux, and the Sioux know how to boast. Well, my father had stories to tell, too . . .

BY BENNETT FOSTER

Dance

had brought two besides the wagon team and as soon as they were ready Zoe hung Clay's cradleboard on her saddlehorn and we rode to the issue grounds.

Beef issue was a wild business. There was a big corral out on the flats and on issue days the agency people loaded it with steers. At one end of the corral was a chute with a platform built over it for clerks to sit on. A clerk called a name — always the head of a family — and when he got an answer, the steers that family had coming were crowded into the chute.

Each family did its own killing and butchering and when everything was set the cattle were turned out and the men and boys took after them. Two or three would follow one steer, yelling and whooping and chasing it. They ran the steers a long way before they killed them, then the women took pack horses and went after the meat. Zoe said the steers were run that way because the Sioux believed meat should be killed while it was hot; they thought that made it sweeter.

The corral was full and the clerks were on the platform when we reached the issue grounds. We had hardly stopped our horses before Many Wounds was called. He dropped his blanket and it was easy to see how he had got his name. Many Wounds was naked except for paint, a breechclout and moccasins; he carried a bow, there was a quiver on his back, and he was scarred all

over his chest and shoulders. He rode out to the pen, held up his hand and talked with the clerks.

We waited while men worked in the corral; then the chute gate opened and three steers came out. Two Kettles, Many Wounds' oldest son, was right beside me, mounted and cradling a Winchester on his arm. I thought he'd go to help his father; I thought the other men would go, but no one moved. Many Wounds swung in behind the cattle, yelling and whooping, and the steers ran like snakes.

"Now you see!" Zoe called. She had to lift her voice because they were shouting all around us. "He is showing Clay how he hunted before the buffalo were gone. It's a big thing, Jebs!"

I thought Many Wounds would never make it, but he did. He was old and slim and fragile, but he killed those steers; killed them with arrows. There were dog holes in the flat and little ravines crossed it, but Many Wounds was horseback; I never saw a better horse. He closed on a steer, his bow arm straightened and his right hand came back. The steer swung off, staggered a hundred yards, and fell.

Many Wounds went on. He rode right between the other pair, regardless of their horns and the rough ground. First one went down and then the other. When the third steer fell Many Wounds circled back, dismounted beside it, then remounting came to us at a dead run. He pulled up beside Zoe, reached out and put his hand on Clay's face. Then he took off a necklace he was wearing and hung it on the baby. The hand was bloody and left its print, and the necklace was made of human finger bones.

Many Wounds was talking all the time he blooded Clay and hung on the necklace, but Zoe didn't tell me what he said. When the old man finished he reined back, talked a minute more, then turned his horse and started for camp. Zoe and Clay and I went, too. We didn't wait to see the rest of the issue.

Back in our tent I asked Zoe for an explanation and she said Many Wounds had done it all for Clay. The blood was to make Clay strong and a good hunter; the necklace to make him brave to kill his enemies. The steers had taken the place of buffalo, and buffalo were sacred.

"Supposed he'd missed?" I asked. "Suppose Many Wounds hadn't killed those steers. Then what?"

Zoe studied quite awhile before she answered. "Then he would die, I think," she said. "He would go off by himself, sing his death song, and die."

Zoe was serious but it sounded like damned foolishness to me. Many Wounds had done his stunt all right — I hoped I'd be as good when I was old — but I didn't like the blood on the baby's face or the necklace he was wearing. Zoe said we had to leave them, her folks would be insulted otherwise, but I noticed

she kept Clay from chewing on the bones.

The beef issue should have been enough excitement for one day but we weren't nearly done. Two Kettles gave a feast that afternoon and in the evening when it began to get dark, we went to Many Wounds' lodge. A crowd was there. A fire was burning and an old man sat by it, thumping an Indian drum. Off a ways was a slim pole with some tufts of black hair tied to the top. They were Crow scalps, Zoe said, and it wasn't necessary for them to be fresh. A brave could hold a dance anytime with whatever scalps he had on hand. While she was explaining, Many Wounds came out.

He had been hidden in his lodge since morning but he hadn't changed his clothes; he wore the same rig and had added an eagle feather bonnet with a tail two yards long. Many Wounds began to dance around the fire and pole, starting slow but getting faster, and shouting as he moved. While he danced he worked with his bow, drawing the string back and letting it twang. Zoe said he was telling how he'd killed the steers.

After a little the dancing changed. Many Wounds began aiming at the scalps and shouted louder than he had before. Zoe spoke again but I didn't need an explanation. Plain as plain, Many Wounds was killing his enemies and taking their scalps; acting it all out. He was an old, old man but there in the firelight he was young again, dancing his scalps and taking a fresh hold on things.

A buck jumped into the circle, joining Many Wounds, and then another and another until there was a dozen. They yelled and bent and stooped and wove in and out. The drum thumped and the fire sent shadows every which way. All of a sudden I wanted to be out there, too, stomping my feet and yelling, showing how big a man I was, but Zoe put her hand on my arm and I stood still. Finally the dance ended and we went to our tent.

Next morning we pulled out for home. I'd seen all the Indians I needed for awhile and Stoneman creek looked good when we arrived. But I wasn't done with my trip to the reservation; I was full of what I'd seen, and told Bates O'Leary and the other men about it. In September my father, Captain Farnford, came north on his annual inspection and I told him, too.

The Captain was a mighty positive man. He had commanded a troop of Jeb Stuart's cavalry during the War Between the States and when the fighting ended had gone back into the cattle business. He'd driven trail herds north and sold them; he had built a big ranch in Texas, and started the steer outfit on Stoneman creek. My brother, Bob, was foreman at the home place, and I ran the ranch up north, but the Captain bossed us both.

"I don't like it, Jebs," the Captain said when I told him about our trip.

"I don't like it at all. We've got nothing in common with those people. They're dirty, lousy savages. Clay's just a baby and maybe there's no harm done, but don't take him over there again. He ain't a papoose, he's a white man, and I want him raised like one."

Maybe the Sioux weren't the cleanest folks in the world, and maybe some of them were lousy, but Zoe and the boy and I hadn't got any on us. And maybe the Sioux were savage, but they were interesting. I tried to tell the Captain so but he went right on.

"There's another thing: You're not up here to go gallivanting off whenever you take a notion; you're here to run this ranch. This is the first time I've seen Clay, and your mother ain't seen him at all. Next year, if you want someplace to go, bring Zoe and Clay down home."

That was an order and I knew the Captain was right; I should have taken my family to see my folks. We went the next summer but that was the last trip we made for a long time. Conditions were changing and I was too busy to leave the ranch.

No place stays the same. That northern country was wilderness when I first saw it but cattle boomed and foreign capital came in. The Delhi Land and Cattle Company was established about forty miles up Stoneman creek, and Bates O'Leary, my old foreman, was made manager. Over north another big outfit was run by Dean Thompson. He was a Vermont Yankee and an ex-Union soldier, but just the same he was a blamed fine man. That gave me good neighbors to the west and north but there are thieves wherever there are cattle, and east and south were different.

East lay a rough country called the Pinnacles. Some of the men in there were square. Some of them. South, beside the railroad, was Ladder, the county seat. Ladder had a few stores and a hotel, but the principal businesses were saloons, gambling and dance halls. When we lost cattle we suspicioned the Pinnacles and Ladder, and in May, the year that Clay was four, our losses got so big that Bates O'Leary and Thompson came to the ranch to talk things over. As an upshot of that talk we held a general meeting of the honest ranchers and organized the Stoneman Creek Stockmen's Association. Thompson was elected President, an executive committee was appointed, and a $250 reward was put on cowthieves.

Two hundred and fifty dollars was considerable money and before long we got results. Bates O'Leary and I were on the executive committee and we paid out four rewards. We thought we'd got our money's worth because the grand jury returned four indictments on our evidence, but when the fall term of district court was held it was a different story. The petit jury was mostly townsmen and they turned our cowthieves loose.

The last trial was the worst. The Parker brothers, Dell and Bert, lived in the Pinnacles and we had a good case against them. They were convicted on the evidence but the jury brought in a verdict of not guilty. The district attorney was sore as a bee-stung bull and old Judge Wayne blew up a storm and told the jury off.

"I have never seen a worse miscarriage of justice," he said. "You haven't done your duty as citizens and none of you will ever serve on a jury in this court again!"

The Judge went on from there but that did us no good. Our association had spent a thousand dollars and not a cow thief was in jail. Worse than that, about a week after the court term closed, our chief witness against the Parkers was killed in Ladder. Dick Whitlaw did the shooting. He was town constable and a gambler, and was plenty bad. That was the second man he'd killed, but the tough element controlled the justice of the peace and Whitlaw came clear on a plea of self defense.

That killing sent the reward business down the drain and I wrote the Captain, asking for advice, but had no reply until after the executive committee met again. The meeting was grim and we decided to go ahead and try a range detective. We sent for a man named Hawley, who had a good reputation, and offered him $150 a month. Hawley took the job and went down into the Pinnacles to see what he could do. After that the Captain's answer came, but it wasn't much help.

"I am pleased," he wrote, "that you are taking the lead in maintaining law and order and putting down theft. However, you must not neglect our own interests because of your stockmen's association."

That made me sore because I hadn't slighted my work. I had received and located three herds of steers and sent the trail outfits, that brought them, back to Texas. When the letter came I was gathering double-wintered cattle and shipping to market. The Captain went on to say that he would not be north at all because mother was feeling poorly. If I'd had sense I'd have dropped everything and gone south right then, but it didn't sound serious. I went ahead with the shipping and when that ended we shaped up for winter.

Winter came late. The storms held off until after Christmas but made up for it from then on. There was no let-up and Clay's fifth birthday, in February, was a real howler, the worst blizzard of the year. In March I had another letter from the Captain. Mother was dead — she went to bed one night and next morning she was gone — and the funeral was over. There was no need for me to come, the Captain said; I couldn't do a thing and he would be north as soon as the snow was off. The writing was shaky.

The Captain was hard hit, and so was I, but I had Zoe and Clay.

The last storms were in March; by the end of April we had wagons out gathering the winter drift; then right at the first of May our stock detective, Hawley, hit the ranch. His horse had fallen with him and he was crippled some, but he had a case against Dick Whitlaw and the Parker brothers. They had been stealing beef and selling it to a railroad grading contractor. Hawley knew where the hides were and had affidavits from men who had bought the meat. I put Hawley to bed and sent word to Thompson and the others on the executive committee. My messages were hardly gone before the Captain came.

It was a shock just to look at the Captain. He had never been very big but now he seemed smaller still, shrunken and lined and old. It was worse to hear him talk. He put Clay on his knees and told us about mother.

"I wanted to see you one last time," he said. "You and Zoe and Clay. I know you're all right, Jebs, but I wanted to see my grandson again before I died."

It was just pitiful. Zoe cried that night and I wanted to cry with her. "He's old, Jebs," she said. "So old and tired. What will we ever do?"

I didn't have an answer, but the next few days, while I waited for my messages to reach their men, I tried to interest the Captain in the ranch. I told him about our winter losses and tried to get him to go out and see the cattle. The Captain had always loved a steer but this time I couldn't rouse him; all he thought of was Clay, and they spent hours together. We had three days of that before Dean Thompson and the others came.

It was raining when they arrived and we held our meeting in the living room. The Captain started to leave but I asked him to stay, so he sat over against the wall, holding Clay on his lap. Hawley made his report and we talked it over. The evidence looked good but our experience was bad. We could bring Whitlaw and the Parkers to trial, but then what? The jury would be friends of Whitlaw's, or afraid of him.

"We need three good killings and a big fire in Ladder," Bates O'Leary said. "We ought to take an outfit into the Pinnacles and clean out the whole bunch."

The other two committee members took it up, siding with Bates and talking tough. It's easy to talk about killing men but it's a harder thing to do. Thompson kept still; he was an old soldier and knew what killing meant. So did the Captain. He was listening to Bates and the others. While I watched him a story came to mind, a thing that happened when I was too young to remember, but that I'd heard many times.

Right after the war, during Reconstruction, the Captain had been arrested, charged with murder. He hadn't done the killing but the trial was going against him so some of his

friends went to the jail, held up the guards and unlocked his cell. They meant to take the Captain with them, but he wouldn't go. The carpetbaggers and Davis' state police were bad, the Captain said, but that was all the government they had and they had to make it work. He stayed in jail and fought the case until he was acquitted.

"Maybe Bates is right," I said, butting into the talk. "Give me the word and I'll take an outfit into the Pinnacles and clean them out. We can clean Ladder, too."

Every man in the room looked at me. They knew I'd had trouble when I first came to Stoneman creek and that I'd seen it through.

The Captain's head came up with a jerk and he put Clay down.

"You don't mean that, Jebs," he said.

"What other way is there?" I asked him. "What else can we do?"

The Captain got up and walked over to the table where we were sitting. His chin stuck out and his shoulders squared. "This talk of killing is all foolishness," he said. "I'm surprised, Jebs. I thought I'd raised you better. Of course there's other things to do. How many hides are there and what are the brands?" He looked at Hawley.

"Fifteen hides," Hawley answered. "Muleshoes, worked over into Parkers' Lazy 88."

"I own the Muleshoe brand," the Captain said, "and I've got a stake in this. Here's what we ought to do." His voice had the ring and snap that I'd been missing.

Maybe it had been done before but I like to give the Captain credit for the plan. We had fifteen hides, he said, and could bring a separate charge against the Parkers and Dick Whitlaw on each of them. That meant fifteen bail bonds to make, fifteen cases to fight and a whale of a lawyer's fee to pay. The district attorney and the judge were honest men but they were angry, too. We could bring the Parkers and Whitlaw before Judge Wayne for preliminary hearings and not go to the justice of the peace in Ladder.

"We can break those men and drive them out of the country," the Captain said. "The law's on our side and we ought to use it."

There were questions and arguments but the Captain had answers and a way for everything. The whole business was settled when Dean Thompson asked if he intended to stay and help us. The Captain's eyes were cold when he answered that he always finished things he started.

They all left next morning. Thompson was to drive over to where court was sitting and talk with the judge and district attorney. Bates O'Leary and the others were to see the association members and make sure they would come to town. Hawley went to Ladder to loaf around, get well, and keep his eyes open. That left me with the Captain, and I had my hands full. He was restless and impatient, but

that was better than the way he'd been.

Ladder filled up for the spring term of district court. All the association members came and some brought their cowboys with them, but Bates O'Leary had allowed for that. He brought a wagon, a cook, and all the extra beds he could rustle. We camped the wagon beyond the depot outside town, and most of our men slept there; but the Captain and I stayed at the hotel. Zoe had insisted on coming and bringing Clay, so we had two rooms side by side. We were lucky to get them. The judge and all the lawyers were at the hotel, too.

Word had leaked out and the Parker brothers and their friends from the Pinnacles were in town. With them, the Ladder toughs, and some other hardcases that drifted in, we had a bad situation. The Exchange Saloon was their chief hangout, every man went armed, and Ladder was a powder keg just waiting to go off. Judge Wayne had been warned not to hold court but he went ahead and so did we.

The Captain owned the stolen cattle so he made the complaints. The district attorney signed them, and the warrants were issued. One was handed the sheriff to serve. I'd been mistaken about the sheriff. I'd always thought he ran with the Ladder bunch, but he was straight. He brought in the Parkers and Dick Whitlaw without trouble, and Judge Wayne held the hearing.

While our evidence was presented the Parkers and Whitlaw watched us, grinning all the time. They knew this was only a preliminary hearing and that when they came before a jury they had us beat. They had pleaded not guilty, but their lawyer didn't bother even to put them on the witness stand. When the hearing ended, Judge Wayne bound them over to the fall term of court and set their bail. It was plenty high, but three saloon keepers and two dance hall owners signed the bonds.

By that time noon had come and the court was recessed. Judge Wayne left and Whitlaw and the others started to go, but the district attorney stopped them.

"Just a minute," he said. "Mr. Sheriff, here is another warrant for these men."

He was holding a whole sheaf of warrants, and Whitlaw's lawyer saw things had gone wrong. He whispered to Whitlaw and the Parkers, then went to the district attorney and talked, low voiced, to him. After a few minutes the district attorney came over and said that Whitlaw's lawyer wanted to see us.

"Tell him to come to the hotel," the Captain said.

We went to the Captain's room, Dean Thompson, Bates O'Leary, and all the association members that could crowd in. Whitlaw and the Parkers didn't come but the lawyer showed up before too long. Maybe he was a jackleg, but he was smart; he had talked to the district attorney

and knew what he was up against. The lawyer wanted all the cases tried as one, and, when we refused, he asked if there was a way we'd compromise.

"Just one," the Captain said. "Whitlaw and the Parkers have got to leave this country and never come back. Otherwise we'll go ahead and prosecute."

Whitlaw's lawyer stalled and asked for time. He wanted the second hearing postponed until next morning and finally Dean Thompson and the Captain agreed to that. Then the lawyer left and we went down to the hotel dining room.

That was a long afternoon. Whisky, bad women, and hot tempers make a poor combination and Thompson and the other leaders tried to keep our people at the wagon, but the Captain and I stayed in town so we'd be handy. The Captain slept awhile and I stayed in our room with Zoe and Clay.

Clay had a book the Captain had brought him, and a set of colored pencils. There were pictures in the book, just outlines, and Clay was coloring them. He had green horses and blue houses and all different kinds of things. When Clay started he never stopped until he got clear done and he worked on that book all afternoon while Zoe and I visited. Part of the time we talked about the Captain and how he had changed since he first came. I said he had only needed a fresh interest and that he was all right now.

"I hope so," Zoe said, "and I hope those men go. If he fails . . ."

I knew what Zoe meant and for a second I was scared. Then the Captain came in, rested from his sleep and ready to go to the wagon for supper. I left him with Zoe and Clay and went to get our buckboard.

It was dark when we came back to the hotel, and Clay was asleep. I carried him upstairs and the Captain took the team on to the livery barn. In our room I dumped Clay on the bed and Zoe started to undress him while I lit the lamp. When it was going I saw a piece of paper on the floor. I picked it up and read what was scrawled on it. The message was meant for the Captain, a warning to drop the cases against Whitlaw and the Parkers or he would be killed. I crumpled the paper and put it in my pocket.

"What is it, Jebs?" Zoe asked.

"Nothing," I said, "but I've got to go out awhile. Don't wait up for me."

Zoe went on undressing Clay and I picked up my gun from where I'd laid it on the bureau and put it in my pants.

Whitlaw and the Parker brothers were where I thought I would find them: in the back room of the exchange Saloon where Whitlaw ran his poker game. They were sitting at the card table and stood up when I came in and closed the door. It was just the four of us alone but I'd have done the same if there had been a crowd.

"What do you want, Farnford?" Whitlaw asked me.

"I got your letter," I said, and threw it on the table. "Delivered to me by mistake. I walked down here to kill you."

Whitlaw was quiet for a minute, then he said, "You talk mighty big. You've got a gun and I ain't armed."

"You're lying!" I said. I could see the bulge of a holster under his coat. "You're always armed!" And then I called him every name which came to mind. I didn't worry about the Parkers. They operated on Whitlaw's nerve and gun. Without him they were nothing.

It's queer how you feel when you make up your mind to kill a man. You don't think of what he might do to you; just what you'll do to him. I wanted Whitlaw to move, to raise his hand, to do anything, but he stood stock still and looked down at the table.

"What kind of a coward are you?" I asked. "What does it take to make you fight?"

I got no answer. Whitlaw wouldn't speak; he wouldn't lift his eyes and look at me. He just stood there.

"You won't fight, you won't do anything," I said. "You're just yellow! Get out of here! Get gone. Don't ever let me look at you again!"

One of the Parkers — Bert, I think — said, "Me and my brother ain't in this, Farnford."

"The hell you're not!" I told him. "You're with him, ain't you?"

They didn't answer, they didn't say a word. I gave them lots of time before I reached behind me for the door knob, turned it, stepped through, and closed the door again. There were men along the bar who watched me as I walked out, but no one called my name.

The Captain had gone to his room when I got back so I sat in the hotel lobby for awhile. Judge Wayne and half a dozen lawyers were there but one by one they drifted off to bed until there was just the clerk and me. Finally the clerk gave up, put the night light on the desk, blew out the hanging lamps and left. I went to the top of the stairs and saw that the Captain's room was dark. So was mine, and I sat on the top step and waited.

Everything was quiet except for the little noises sleepers make. I sat there and I was all mixed up. I'd meant to kill Whitlaw and I hadn't done it; now I didn't know what I would do. Part of the time I was mad at Whitlaw and then I was sore at myself. The next day was coming and I'd acted like a fool.

After awhile a rooster crowed someplace away off, and then a man began to snore until I thought he'd choke. By and by the rooster crowed again, and then, presently, it was morning. The clerk came to the lobby and began to sweep out. A sleepy waitress opened the dining room. I heard the morning passenger train whistling for the crossings. It stopped at the depot, then went on

again and I got up and walked down stairs and on out to the porch.

The sun was up and there was a man on horseback coming from the depot. When he was close enough I recognized Dean Thompson. He called good morning, stopped, got down and wrapped his reins around the hitchrail.

"I got up early," Thompson said when he was on the porch. "I thought I'd eat breakfast with your father so we could plan our strategy today. I guess that won't be necessary now."

"Why not?" I asked.

Thompson was grinning. That hard old Yankee face of his was split wide open. "Because of what I've just seen," he said. "I stopped at the depot to watch the train. When it started to pull out, Dick Whitlaw and the Parkers ran from the baggage room where they'd been hiding and jumped on board. They're gone, Jebs! They've run away and left their bondsmen to hold the sack!"

"They're gone?" I asked, and knew I sounded foolish.

"And won't be back!" Thompson clapped his hand down on my shoulder. "I want to see the Captain, Jebs. I want to take off my hat to him."

"He's not up yet," I said, "but the dining room is open. I'll buy your breakfast while we wait for him." Nobody ever handed me a million dollars but I knew how it felt.

The dining room filled up while we were eating. First, Judge Wayne came to our table, then the Captain joined us with Zoe and Clay. Zoe's face was tired and drawn but all she did was touch my shoulder as she passed. When Thompson told what had happened we had a celebration.

"They couldn't stand the pressure," the Captain said. "I suppose we'll still have some stealing but nothing like it's been. Those three were the kingpins. I've been interested in this for several reasons but mainly because of my grandson. I want Clay to grow up where there's law and order. Ain't that right, Judge?"

Judge Wayne agreed and asked the Captain if he wanted the case dismissed, but the Captain said no, we'd let the bondsmen get hit right in the pocketbook where it would hurt. Then Zoe excused herself and took Clay upstairs, and the rest of us went to the lobby and sat down.

The Captain was feeling fine. Judge Wayne and Thompson couldn't say enough about him, how smart he was and all, and the Captain ate it up. A coward doesn't tell what makes him run. Dick Whitlaw and the Parkers were gone, the Captain had the credit, and I was satisfied. I wasn't very proud of what I'd done.

"This whole thing reminds me of when I was with Stuart," the Captain said. "I was on patrol and we jumped a company of Yankees at a crossroads. They could of eat us up but when we made a demonstration

the whole kaboodle ran. They didn't even try to fight." He was rowelling Dean Thompson; he knew that Thompson was a Union man.

Thompson took it good. He would have taken anything right then. "You were with Stuart?" he asked.

"Till he was killed at Yellow Tavern," the Captain answered. "I rode with Stuart around the Union Army."

I left them talking and followed Zoe upstairs. Clay was sprawled out on the floor in our room, coloring his book, and Zoe jumped up from beside him and ran to me.

"I couldn't sleep," she said. "You didn't come and didn't come. Jebs, don't ever leave me like that again!"

"Now honey," I said, "it's all right. Everything's fine." I held her until she pushed back from me and wiped her eyes and smiled. "You're tired," I said. "When the Captain gets done talking we'll go home where you can get some rest."

"I'm not tired," Zoe said, "but I know you are. Please lie down, Jebs. I'll pack up and get ready."

She put her hand on my arm and started to lead me to the bed. All at once I was done. I put my gun back on the bureau and lay down. "I'll just stay here a minute," I said, "then I'll get up and help you." Zoe fixed the pillows and then bent and kissed me.

That hotel was never built to keep out noise; it was just log walls and board floors and partitions. Our door was open and I could hear the voices in the lobby, not the words but the sounds. The Captain's voice came strong and I knew the story he was telling. He was with Stuart again, riding around the Union Army, living it all over and feeling young. Zoe chuckled and I asked her what was funny.

"I was just thinking," she said. "Do you remember when we visited the reservation, Jebs?"

At first I didn't understand Zoe, then recollection came. I thought about old Many Wounds out in the firelight, dancing his scalps and getting a fresh hold on things. Downstairs the Captain laughed. I laughed, too, and Clay got up on the bed beside me. He'd brought his book.

"Look, papa," Clay said. "I'm all finished. I colored this . . . and this . . . and this . . . I can color good. I can color better than anybody, can't I, papa?"

Zoe came to get him. "You mustn't bother papa, Clay," she said. "He's tired. And you know it isn't nice to boast."

She started to take Clay away but I reached out and got the book and stopped her. "Let him brag," I said. "He comes by it honest. It runs in both sides of his family."

Behind the Badge

BY M. A. POWELL

BILLY TILGHMAN

Billy Tilghman did not drink, swear, or gamble. This would seem to have cut him off from most of the pleasures of life in the West, but that wasn't the case at all. He positively enjoyed capturing outlaws, and probably brought in more of them alive than any other single peace officer.

He was a tall, mild-countenanced, handsome man and so gentle-natured that he remained "Billy" all his life. In later years, when his moustache had gone white, he was "Uncle Billy" to everybody who knew him.

As a young man he shot buffaloes, like other great Western figures. But Billy established the unofficial record for buffalo hides in a single season. He brought in 3,300 hides, all the animals having been shot between September 1 and April 1.

Once, when still very young, he was with a buffalo shooting expedition which had trouble with Indians. Whenever all members of the party left the camp, the Indians would come up to steal supplies and hides. Young Billy volunteered to remain behind in concealment and give the Indians a welcome they didn't expect. Soon seven approached, having seen the rest of the party leave. Tilghman opened fire and killed four of the seven, and the camp was not bothered again.

Such shooting would be enough to give most men a reputation as a killer. But though Tilghman went on shooting men all his life, he never earned the title of "man-killer." He was too kind and polite for people to think of him as a killer, especially when he followed the strict rule of always shooting second in any gunfight. As with Wyatt Earp and many

other peace officers, Tilghman had a code that forbade gunplay until it was absolutely necessary.

People kept telling Tilghman he would get killed someday, and it was said that enough lead came his way to sink a battleship — but he didn't care. He had his manner of fighting, and he stuck to it. Wild Bill Hickok might shoot men in the back, but Tilghman fought differently.

His main purpose in life was to work himself out of a job. He wanted to make the West a place where people did not have to wear guns. From the age of twenty he devoted himself to bringing law and order to a wild country by putting the outlaws behind bars. Nobody knows the number of men he killed, but he always did it regretfully.

Other marshals and sheriffs made lasting names for themselves with only a few years in office. Even Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson finally begged off and turned down law enforcement jobs, knowing that sooner or later some braggart would shoot them merely to gain glory. But Tilghman worked tirelessly for fifty years, piling up a record for service that nobody else even approached. He was a workhorse, never out of harness. Moreover, he is cited as the only officer besides Earp who never backed away from a fight or challenge, no matter what the odds.

His complete honesty and fairness saved his life on at least one occasion. He was looking for Bill Doolin, the Oklahoma outlaw whose gang succeeded the Daltons' as the most dangerous in that territory. Rancher friends helped Doolin's gang to hide out, and they could "disappear" whenever they wanted to. Tilghman went with one deputy to visit one such sympathizer on a cold winter's day. He left the deputy outside and went into the bunkhouse, where he saw a surly-looking cowboy sitting by the fire with a rifle over his lap. Tilghman walked up to the fire between two rows of curtained bunks, and turned his back to warm himself. As he turned, he saw that a gun barrel was protruding ever so slightly from behind each curtain. Eight guns pointed at his chest.

He gave no sign he saw them, but kept his glance on the cowboy and made inquiries about the rancher in his usual polite manner. He said he happened to stop by to arrange a fight between a bulldog of his and one belonging to the rancher. After a few minutes he walked out, still not looking at the bunks. He learned afterwards that one of the outlaws had rushed out to shoot him in the back but had been restrained by Doolin, who said that Tilghman was too fine a man to die like that.

However, he still had to catch Doolin. The outlaw was trailed to Eureka Springs, Ark., where he had gone to take the baths for his rheumatism. Since both men were known to each other, Tilghman decided to put on the most outlandish garb he could find. He made a tour of the bathhouses "disguised" in a silk hat

and swallowtail coat — the first time he had ever worn such garments.

He found Doolin in the parlor of a bathhouse, watching the door warily, but the outlaw did not recognize him. Tilghman walked calmly through the room, ordered his bath, then came back at once. He was determined to take his man alive, and quickly pressed his gun against Doolin's chest. But the outlaw clawed for his own gun, and Tilghman caught him by the sleeve. As the two men struggled, Doolin's hand moved closer and closer to the gun under his arm. Tilghman held on desperately and kept thrusting his pistol at Doolin's chest, ordering him to give up. At last the sleeve tore, and Tilghman had to bring the fight to a halt.

Most men would have fired, but Tilghman still held back. Instead, he shouted, "Don't make me kill you, Bill!" — and the outlaw gave up. They rode back to Oklahoma together, Doolin without handcuffs.

Over the years, he received countless assignments from governors and presidents, and he accepted every one of them. In 1924, he was still keeping the peace, at the age of 70, when shot by a drunken prohibition officer.

As usual, Uncle Billy's guns were still undrawn. He had taken away the gun the man was firing and let him go, but the man had another gun in a concealed scabbard and he used it.

However, it was just as well. Not long before, Uncle Billy had told a friend that he would rather "go out in the smoke," because he didn't want to go to bed to die.

SNOWBLIND

The only one who could save him from the killers was his son. His son, whom he'd never trusted with a gun.

HE RODE the big roan stiffly, the collar of his heavy mackinaw pulled high on his neck. His battered stetson was tilted over his forehead, crammed down against his ears. Still, the snow seeped in, trailing icy fingers across the back of his neck.

His fingers inside the right-hand mitten were stiff and cold, and he held the reins lightly, his left hand jammed into his pocket. Carefully, he guided the horse over the snow-covered trail, talking gently to him. He held a hand up in front of his eyes, palm outward to ward off the stinging snow, peered into the whirling whiteness ahead of him.

The roan lifted its head, ears back. Quickly, he dropped his hand to the horse's neck, patted him soothingly.

He felt the penetrating cold attacking his naked hand, withdrew it quickly and stuffed it into the pocket again, clenching it into a tight fist, trying to wrench whatever warmth he could from the inside of the pocket.

"Damnfool kid," he mumbled. "Picks a night like this."

The roan plodded on over the slippery, graded surface, unsure of its footing. Gary kept staring ahead into the whiteness, looking for the cabin, waiting for it to appear big and brown against the smoke-grey sky.

His brows and lashes were interlaced with white now, and a fine sifting of snow caked in the ridges alongside his eyes, lodged in the seams swinging down from his nose flaps. His mouth was pressed into a tight, weary line. He kept thinking of the cabin, and a fire. And a cup of coffee, and a smoke.

It was the smoke that had started it all, he supposed. He shook his head sadly, bewildered by the thought that a simple thing like a

cigarette could send a kid kiting away from home. Hell, Bobby was too young to be smoking, and he'd deserved the wallop he'd gotten.

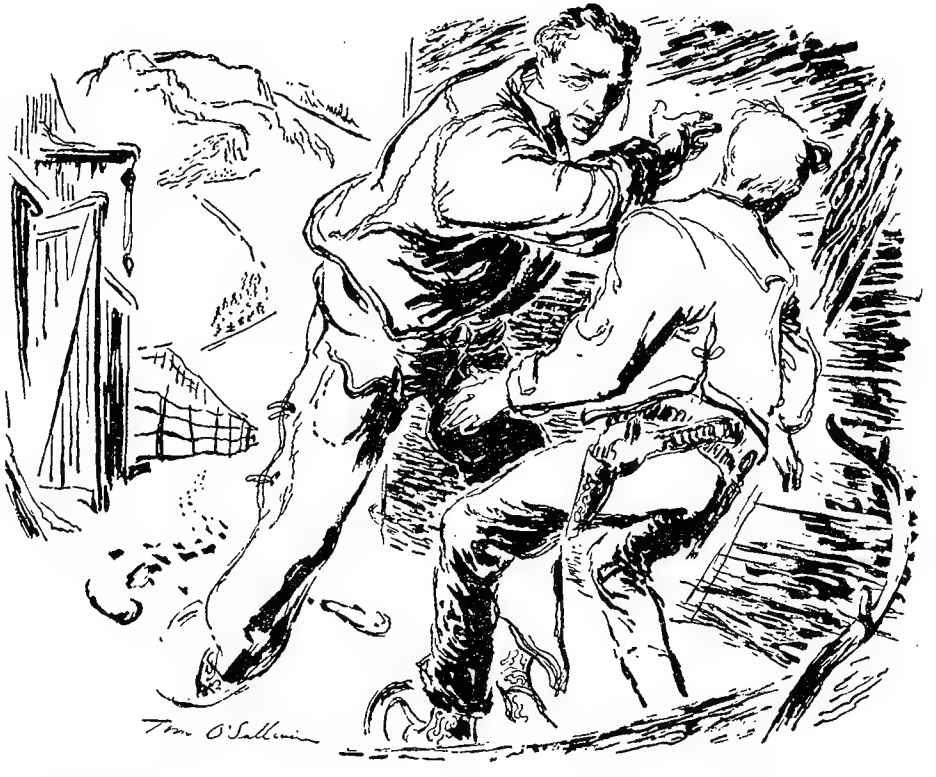
He thought about it again now, his head pressed against the sharp wind. He'd been unsaddling Spark, a frisky sorrel if ever there was one, when he saw the wisp of smoke curling up from behind the barn. At first, he thought it was a fire. He swung the saddle up over the rail and took off at a trot, out of breath when he rounded the barn's corner.

Bobby had been sitting there, his legs crossed, gun belt slung low on his faded jeans, calm as could be. And puffing on a cigarette.

"Well, hello," Gary'd said in surprise.

Bobby jumped to his feet and ground the cigarette out under his heel. "Hello, Dad," he said soberly. Gary remembered wondering why

BY EVAN HUNTER



the boy's face had expressed no guilt, no remorse.

His eyes stared down at the shredded tobacco near the boy's boot. "Having a party?" he asked.

"Why, no."

"Figured you might be. See you're wearing your guns, and smoking and all. Figured you was having a little party for yourself."

"I was headin' into town, Dad. Feller has to wear guns in town, you know that."

Gary stroked his jaw. "That right?"

"Ain't safe otherwise."

Gary's mouth tightened then, and his eyes grew hard. "Feller has to smoke in town, too, I suppose."

"Well, Dad . . ."

"Take off them guns!"

Bobby's eyes widened, startling blue against his tanned features. He ran lean fingers through his sun-bleached hair and said, "But I'm goin' to town. I just told . . ."

"You ain't goin' nowheres. Take off them guns."

"Dad . . ."

"No damn kid of mine's goin' to tote guns before he's cut his eye teeth! And smoking! Who in holy hell do you think you are? Behaving like a gun slick and smoking fit to . . ."

Bobby's voice was firm. "I'm seventeen. I don't have to take this kind of . . ."

Gary's hand lashed out suddenly, open, catching the boy on the side of his cheek. He pulled his hand back rapidly, sorry he'd struck his son, but unwilling to acknowledge his error. Bobby's own hand moved to his cheek, touched the bruise that was forming under the skin.

"Now get inside and take them guns off," Gary said.

Bobby didn't answer. He turned his back on his father and walked toward the house.

The snow started at about five, and when Gary called his son for supper at six, the boy's room was empty. The peg from which his guns usually hung, the guns Gary'd said he could wear when he was twenty-one, was bare. With a slight twinge of panic, Gary had run down to the barn to find the boy's brown mare gone.

Quickly, he'd saddled the roan and started tracking him. The tracks were fresh in the new snow, and before long Gary realized the boy was heading for the old cabin in the hills back of the spread.

He cursed now as the roan slipped again. Damned if he wasn't going to give that boy the beating of his life. Seventeen years old! Anxious to start smoking and frisking around, anxious to wrap his finger around a trigger. It would have been different if Meg . . .

He caught himself abruptly, the old pain stabbing deep inside him again, the pain that thoughts of her always brought. He bit his lip against the cold and against the memory, clamped his jaws tight as if capping

the unwanted emotions that threatened to overflow his consciousness again.

This was a rough land, a land unfriendly to women. For the thousandth time he told himself he should never have brought her here. He'd made a big mistake with Meg, perhaps the biggest mistake of his life. He'd surrendered her to a wild, relentless land, and he was left now with nothing but a memory and a tombstone. And Bobby. He would not make the same mistake with Bobby.

How long ago had it been, he asked himself. *How long?*

Was Bobby really seventeen, had it really been that long?

"All right, mister," the voice said.

He lifted his hand, tried to shield his eyes. The snow whirled restlessly before them, danced crazily in the knifing wind. Through the snow, he made out the shadowy bulk of three men sitting their horses. His hand automatically dropped to the rifle hanging in the leather scabbard on his saddle.

"I wouldn't, mister," the same voice said.

He squinted into the snow, still unable to make out the faces of the three riders. "What's this all about, fellers?" he asked, trying to keep his voice calm. Through the snow, he could see that two of the riders were holding drawn guns.

"What's it all about, he wants to know," one of the men said.

There was a flurry of movement and the rider in the middle spurred his horse forward, reining in beside Gary's roan.

"Suppose you tell *us* what it's all about, mister."

Gary's eyes dropped inadvertently to the holster strapped outside his mackinaw, the gun butt pointing up toward his pocket.

"Don't know what you mean, fellers."

"He don't know what we mean, Sam."

The rider close to Gary snickered. "What you doin' on this trail?" His breath left white pock marks on the air. Gary stared hard at his face, at the bristle covering his chin, at the shaggy black brows and hard eyes. He didn't recognize the man.

"I'm lookin' for a stray," Gary said, thinking again of Bobby somewhere on the trail ahead.

"In this weather?" Sam scoffed. "Who you kiddin', mister?"

Another of the riders pulled close to the pair, staring hard at Gary. "He's poster-happy, I think," he said.

"Shut up, Moss," Sam commanded.

The third rider sat his horse in the distance, his hands in his pockets, his head tucked low inside his upturned collar. "Moss is right, Sam. The old geezer's seen our pictures and . . . "

"I said shut up!" Sam repeated.

"Hell, ain't nobody chases strays in a storm," the third rider protested.

Sam lifted the rifle from Gary's scabbard, then took the .44 from the holster at his hip. Gary looked down at the empty holster, then raised his eyes again.

"Ain't no need for this," he said. "I'm lookin' for a stray. Wandered off before the storm started, and I'm anxious to get him back 'fore he freezes board-stiff."

"Sure," Sam said, "you're lookin' for a stray. Maybe you're lookin' for *three* strays, huh?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Gary said. "You feel like throwing your weight around, all right. You're three and I'm one, and I ain't goin' to argue. But I still don't know what you're talking about."

"We gonna freeze out here while this bird gives us lawyer talk?" Moss asked.

The third rider said, "You know of a cabin up here, mister?"

"What?" Gary asked.

"You deaf or some . . ."

"Rufe gets impatient," Sam interrupted. "'Specially when he's cold. We heard there was a cabin up here somewheres. You know where?"

"No," Gary said quickly.

"He's poster-happy," Moss insisted. "What the hell're we wastin' time talking for?" He pulled back the hammer of his pistol, and the click sounded loud and deadly beneath the murmur of the wind.

Gary combed his memory, trying to visualize the "wanted" posters he'd seen. It wasn't often that he went to town, and he didn't pay much attention to such things when he did ride in. He silently cursed his memory, realizing at the same time that it didn't matter one way or the other. He didn't know why these men were wanted, or just what they were running from. But he sure as hell knew they *were* wanted. The important thing was to keep them away from Bobby, away from the cabin up ahead.

"Seems I do remember a cabin," he said.

"Yeah? Where is it?"

Gary pointed down the trail, away from the cabin. "That way, I think."

"We can't afford thinkin'," Rufe said. "And we can't afford headin' back toward town either, mister."

"That ain't the way to town," Gary said softly.

"We just come from there," Sam said. He yanked his reins, pulling his horse around. "I think we'll go up this way, mister. Stay behind him, Moss."

Rufe, up the trail a ways, turned his horse and started pushing against the snow, Sam close behind him. Gary kept the roan headed into the wind, and behind him he could hear the labored breathing of Moss' horse.

"We'll have to hole up for tonight," Rufe said over his shoulder.

"Yeah, if we can find that damn cabin," Sam agreed.

"We'll find it. The old geezer ain't a very good liar."

They rode into the wind, their

heads bent low. Gary's eyes stayed on the trail, searching for signs beneath the tracks of the lead horse. Bobby had sure as hell been heading for the cabin. Suppose he was there already? The boy was wearing his guns, and would probably be fool enough to try shooting it out with these killers. Maybe they weren't killers, either. Maybe they were just three strangers who weren't taking any chances. Then why had the one called Moss kept harping on posters, and why had Rufe mentioned pictures of the trio? *Stop kidding yourself*, Gary thought. *They'd as soon shoot you as look at you.*

"Well, now ain't that funny!" Rufe shouted back. "Looks like the cabin was up this way after all, mister."

Gary raised his eyes, squinted at the squat log formation ahead on the trail. The ground levelled off a bit, and they walked the horses forward, pulling up just outside the front door. Sam dismounted and looped his reins over the rail outside. Gary felt the sharp thrust of a gun in his back.

"Come on," Moss said.

Gary swung off his saddle, patting the roan on its rump. "These animals will freeze out here," he said.

"You can bring out some blankets," Sam said. Together, he and Rufe kicked open the door of the cabin, their guns level. Gary's heart gave a lurch as he waited for sound from within.

"'Pears to be empty," Rufe said.

"Ummm. Come on, Moss. Bring the old man in."

They stomped into the cabin, closing the door against the biting wind outside. Sam struck a match, fumbled around in the darkness for a lantern. There was the sound of a scraping chair, the sudden thud of bone against wood,

"Goddamnit!" Sam bellowed.

Gary waited in the darkness, the hard bore of Moss' pistol in his back. The wick of the lantern flared brightly, faded as Sam lowered it.

"Right nice," Rufe commented.

"Better get a fire going," Sam said.

Rufe crossed the room to the stone fireplace, heaped twigs and papers onto the grate, methodically placed the heavier pieces of wood over these. He struck a match, held it to the paper, watched the flames curl upward as the twigs caught.

"There," he said. He shrugged out of his leather jacket. "This ought to be real comfy."

"There's some blankets on the bunk," Sam said. "Take 'em out and cover the horses, mister."

Gary walked to the bunk, filled his arms with the blankets, and started toward the door. Just inside the door, he stopped, waiting.

Moss shrugged out of his mackinaw. "Go on," he told Gary. "We'll watch you from here. Too damn cold out there."

Gary opened the door, ducked his head against the wind and ran toward the horses. He dropped the

blankets, gave one quick look at the door, and then swung up onto the roan's saddle.

"You want a hole in your back?" Sam's voice came from the window.

Gary didn't answer. He kept sitting the horse, staring down at the blankets he'd dropped in the snow.

"Now cover them horses and get back in here," Sam said. "And no more funny business."

Gary dropped from the saddle wearily. Gently, he covered all the horses, feeling the animals shiver against the slashing wind and snow. He was silently grateful that Bobby hadn't been in the cabin, but he was beginning to wonder now if the boy hadn't been lost in this storm. The thought was a disturbing one. He finished with the horses and headed back for the cabin. Moss pulled open the door for him, slamming it shut behind him as soon as he'd entered.

"Get out of those clothes," Sam said, "and sit over there by the table. One more fool stunt like that last one, and you're a dead man."

Gary walked over to the table, folding his mackinaw over the back of a chair. Rufe was sitting in a chair opposite him, his feet on the table, the chair thrust back at a wild angle.

Gary sat down, his eyes dropping to Rufe's hanging gun.

"Wonder how long this'll last," Sam said from the window.

"Who cares?" Moss said. He was poking around in the cupboard. "'Nough food here to last a couple of weeks."

"Still, we should be moving on."

"You know," Rufe drawled contentedly, "maybe we shoulda split up."

"What the hell brought that on?" Sam asked impatiently.

"Just thinkin'. They'll be lookin' for three men. They won't be expectin' single riders."

"That's what the old man's for," Sam said, smiling.

"I don't follow."

"They won't be expectin' *four* riders, either. The old man's coming with us when we leave."

"The hell I am," Gary said loudly.

"The hell you *are*," Sam repeated.

Gary looked at the gun in Sam's hand. He made a slight movement forward, as if he would rise from his chair, and then he slumped back again. They were treating him like a kid, like a simple, addlebrained . . . He caught his thoughts abruptly. He suddenly knew how Bobby must have felt when he'd slapped him this afternoon.

Sam walked away from the window, stood warming the seat of his pants at the fireplace.

"Four riders," he said. "A respectable old man and his three sons." He looked at Gary and chuckled noisily.

He was still chuckling when the front door was kicked open. Gary turned his head swiftly, his eyes widening at sight of the white-encrusted figure in the doorway. The figure held two guns, and they gleamed menacingly in the firelight.

Sam clawed at his pistol, and a shot erupted in the stillness of the cabin. The gun came free, and Sam brought it up as the second shot slammed into his chest. He clutched at the stone mantel, swung around, his legs suddenly swiveling from under him. He dropped down near the fire, his hand falling into it in a cascade of sparks.

The men in the room seemed to freeze. Moss with his back to the cupboard, Rufe with his feet propped up on the table, the figure standing in the doorframe with smoking guns.

Gary looked at the figure, trying to understand that this was Bobby, that this was his son standing there, his son who had just shot a man.

And suddenly, action returned to the men in the room. Moss pushed himself away from the cupboard in a double-handed draw. At the same instant, Rufe began to swing his legs off the table.

Gary kicked out, sending the chair flying out from under Rufe. From the doorway, Bobby's guns exploded again and Moss staggered back against the glass-paned cupboard, his shoulders shattering the doors. Bobby kept shooting, and Moss collapsed in a shower of glass shards. Rufe sprawled to the floor, tried to untangle himself from the chair as Gary reached down and yanked the gun from his holster, backing away from the table quickly. Rufe crouched on the floor for an instant, then viciously threw the chair aside and reached for his remaining gun. Gary blinked his eyes as he saw orange flame lance out from the gun in his fist. The bullet took Rufe between the eyes, and he clung to life for an instant longer before he fell to the floor, his gun unfired.

Bobby came into the cabin, hatless, his hair a patchwork of snow.

"I figured you were trailin' me," he said. "I swung around the cabin, trying to lose you."

"Lucky you did," Gary said softly. He stood staring at his son, watching the guns steady in his hands. For a moment, their eyes met, and Bobby turned away.

"I ain't goin' back with you, Dad," he said. "A . . . a man's got to do things his own way. A man can't have . . ."

"Suppose we talk about it later, Bob," Gary said.

He saw his son's eyes widen. He'd never called him anything but Bobby until this moment.

Gary smiled warmly. "Suppose we talk about it later," he repeated. "After we've had a cup of coffee." And then, though it was extremely difficult, he added, "And a smoke together."

Judd had lots of trouble waiting for Henry. Tempting trouble, in a big corked jug.

BY BILL GULICK

The

FRESH from his Saturday evening bath, and dressed in his best courting clothes, Judd Kimbrough reached for a brush to give his curly blonde hair a final lick. *Ping!* Like a shot, a button flew off his skin-tight pink silk shirt and bounced against the bureau mirror. Swearing, Judd pawed for it.

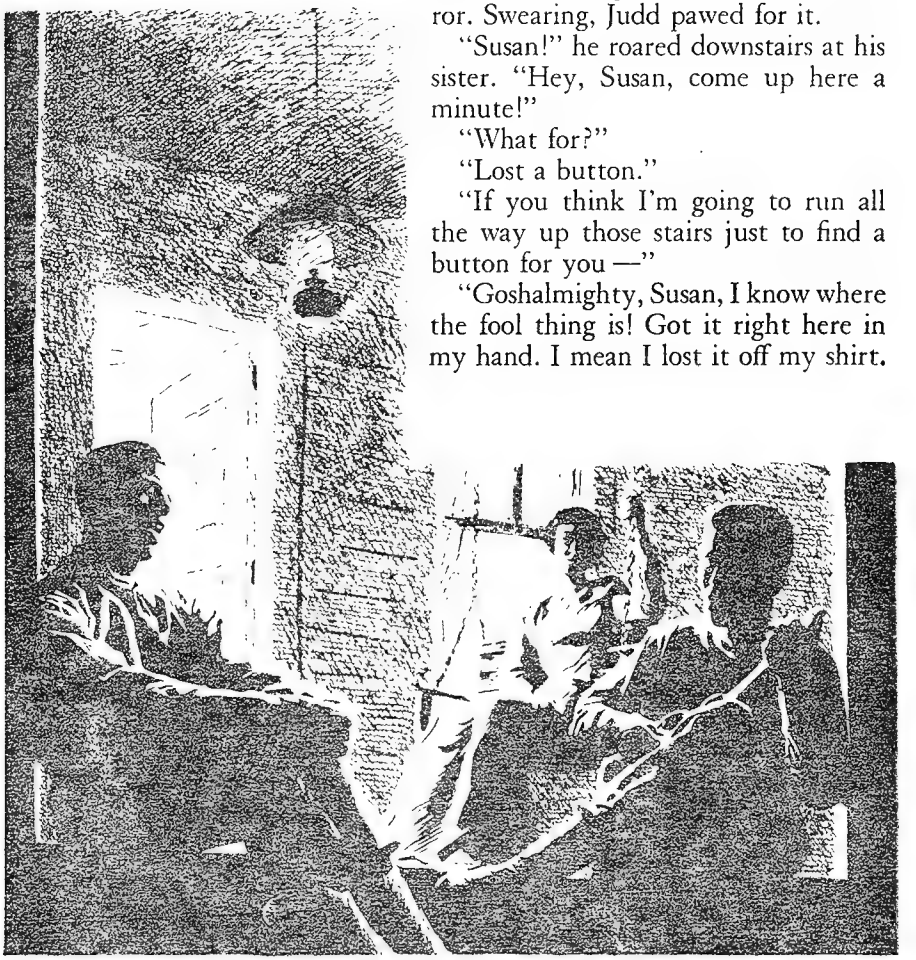
"Susan!" he roared downstairs at his sister. "Hey, Susan, come up here a minute!"

"What for?"

"Lost a button."

"If you think I'm going to run all the way up those stairs just to find a button for you —"

"Goshalmighty, Susan, I know where the fool thing is! Got it right here in my hand. I mean I lost it off my shirt.



Courting Feud

What do you sew these things on with, anyhow? Spider webs?"

"What's the difference? You'd pop them if I used baling wire. You want to get sewed up, you can trot right down here."

With the button treasured carefully in his hand, Judd lumbered down the stairs, a big, tanned young man with shoulders barn-door wide, no stomach at all, barely enough hips to hold his pants up, and a face that, if not handsome, could at least be called ruggedly masculine. He found Susan sitting in the front parlor staring out the window in the growing dusk. It struck him she looked sad and thoughtful, which was a strange way for any girl as young and pretty as she was to look of a Saturday evening.

"What's the matter? You sick?"

"No," Susan answered, tight-lipped. "Give me the button."

She seemed to take an ungodly long time to do the job. As he fidgeted, she said sharply, "Oh, stand still, you big ox! It won't make a never-mind to Molly Rankin if you are two minutes late."

"Wouldn't have been late at all," Judd grumbled, "if my clothes hadn't started coming apart. It's a sad state of affairs when a man's own sister can't keep him in buttons."

"Molly could do better?"

"Darned right she could."

"Then why don't you marry her? You've been courting her ever since her ma died six months ago."

Judd squirmed, half of a mind to tell her that he'd already popped the question to Molly Rankin but that Molly had just smiled in that funny mysterious way of hers and said she'd think it over. He put on his hat and coat. "Guess I'll be goin'. Sure you feel all right?"

"Yes."

"Henry Hooker callin' tonight?"

Susan replaced her work basket on the window seat, her voice flat. "No."

Judd scowled. "You two have a fight?"

"I wouldn't lower myself to fight with Henry Hooker. I merely told him a few things — which happened to be the exact truth — and he didn't like it."

Judd put a big hand on her shoulder and said soothingly, "Aw, Susan, you shouldn't have done that. I've always thought the world of Henry, even though he is a runt. Fact, I kind of figured you and him would —"

"Well, figure again!" Susan said sharply, and ran upstairs to her room.

It was a warm, early summer evening. Driving over to Molly Rankin's in the buggy, Judd told himself he'd have to have a talk with Henry and see if he couldn't straighten things out. Susan had a temper, there was no denying that. Matter of fact, all the Kimbroughs had had tempers. Why, sometimes he himself kind of blew up — like the time he got so blind mad when the mule bit him that he grabbed hold of the fool thing and bit it right back. But Henry was a fine, reasonable sort of fellow and would understand how Susan was, once Judd explained it to him.

There was still a smidgin of daylight left when he drove into the yard. Enough to show him that Molly already had a caller. He climbed out of the buggy and walked up to the porch, trying to make out whose rig stood just ahead of his. Lamplight shining through the window showed Molly sitting in the porch swing and a man on the porch steps beneath her.

"Hi, Molly," Judd said. "Nice evening, ain't it?"

"Why, Judd," Molly answered brightly. "How sweet of you to call!"

Now it struck Judd as strange she should say that, because he'd been calling every Saturday evening for months. He peered at the man on the porch steps.

"Howdy, Judd," Henry Hooker said. "Pull up a step and have a seat."

"That you, Henry?"

"Was the last time I looked. Sit down. Molly and I were having some lemonade and doing a bit of singing." The bulky object in Henry's lap came to life and started giving out guitar sounds. "Heard this one, Molly? It's a humdinger."

Judd sat down and listened with feigned politeness. Seemed to him he'd heard Henry Hooker play and sing lots better other times and other places — particularly other places, which was where he wished Henry was right now. The lemonade Molly poured for him didn't taste near as good as what she'd made for him before, either. Seemed sour. Awful sour.

"Wonderful!" Molly said when Henry had finished. "Wasn't it, Judd?"

"Tolerable," Judd grunted. There was a spell of silence. Then he said, "How come you ain't where you usually are on Saturday night, Henry?"

Henry Hooker was a small, compactly built man with an oval face, dimples, and eyes that looked considerably more innocent than they actually were. He grinned. "'Cause I'm here. Now I'll play 'Red River Valley,' Molly, and you can sing it with me." He struck a chord. "You can sing, too, Judd, if you feel up to it. Or try, anyhow."

Now the only two occasions on which Judd ever attempted to sing were when herding cattle or taking a bath, for he had long ago learned

he couldn't carry a tune in a gunny sack with its mouth sewed shut. But because he was mad, he tried now, first waiting a line or two to catch the pitch, then swinging aboard on the chorus.

" 'Oh, remember the Red River Valley,' " he roared, throwing his head back and tromping the step with one foot to keep time, " 'An the sweetheart who —' "

Henry stopped playing, Molly stopped singing, and, wondering what ailed them, Judd stopped too. Way off somewhere a coyote howled, sad and mournful.

"Listen, Judd!" Henry said, cocking his head to one side. "Your mate hears you callin' and she's giving you an answer. What's she sayin'?"

"Got a little off-key," Judd said, somewhat abashed. "Try her again, Henry, only this time play louder so I can follow the tune."

"Judd," Molly said hastily, "I think we'd better let Henry do the singing."

Judd lapsed into sullen silence. For an hour Henry played and sang, then Molly suggested they go into the house. "I'll make some candy while you boys play checkers." She looked at Judd. "You can play checkers, can't you?"

Judd was getting madder by the minute. " 'Course I can. Come on, Henry, get set for a cleaning."

"Who won?" Molly asked, coming in with the candy a while later.

"Why, I seem to have took three straight games," Henry said, grinning. "Guess Judd's kind of rusty on his checkers."

Judd sat staring down at his hands, doing his best to keep from breathing too hard and popping his buttons. Seemed like there ought to be something he could beat Henry at. Indian wrestling, maybe. Or pitching hay. Trouble was, neither was a pastime you could play in the house.

Along about ten, Henry got up and said he guessed he'd be going. Judd didn't raise any objections. Molly saw Henry to the door, then came back into the parlor, that funny mysterious smile on her face.

"Nice, isn't he?"

"Who?" Judd grunted.

"Why, Henry, of course."

"Oh, him. Well, he can sing some, I guess."

Molly looked pointedly at the clock. "Judd, don't you think —"

"Molly," Judd said bluntly, "are we going to get married or aren't we?"

She smiled. "I'm still thinking it over."

"Goshalmighty!" he exploded. "How long are you going to keep me hanging like a beef on a hook? You know it ain't right for you to live all alone in this big old house —"

"I need a man to take care of me," she cut in quickly, "and my place and your place would make a fine ranch if they were joined together. You've said that before."

"It's so, ain't it?"

"Possibly." She got that queer look in her eyes again. "Can't you think of a better reason than that to marry me?"

Judd pondered. He wracked his brain for a more practical reason, a more logical reason, but for the life of him he couldn't think of one. He began to feel the way he'd felt when he bit the mule.

"You ain't gone sweet on Henry Hooker, have you?"

"Well, Henry is a lot of fun. Always cheerful, always thoughtful —"

"Yeah, that's what all the girls he's courted say. Far as I'm concerned, he ain't worth the powder it'd take to blow him up."

Molly's eyes flashed. "He's as good a man as a lot of others I could name. Maybe even better."

"Than me, for instance?"

"I didn't say that." She fetched his hat and handed it to him. "Now you'd better go."

"But, Molly — !"

"Please, Judd. I won't have you ruining my reputation by staying here till all hours. What would the neighbors think if they saw your rig in my yard 'way after ten o'clock?"

Driving home in the moonlight, Judd admitted Henry Hooker had made him look like a fool. Molly had just the same as said so. Well, there was only one thing to do. He'd have to up and prove to Molly that even though he couldn't sing worth a hoot, couldn't play checkers worth a hoot, couldn't do a lot of inconsequential things as well as Henry did them, he could beat Henry all hollow when it came to things that really counted.

Like for instance — well, like . . .

Suddenly a lightning bolt of inspiration hit him. If there was one single thing Henry Hooker prided himself on, it was his string of quarter horses — the fastest-starting, sprintingest, runningest ponies in the whole county, to hear him tell it. But Judd had an unbroken, hammer-headed pinto. . . .

Next morning, Judd was up and in the saddle at the crack of dawn. Two hours later he had dragged the pinto in off the range at rope's end and was securing it to the snubbing post in the center of the corral when Susan came out of the house and called, "Judd, don't you want any breakfast?"

"Later," he grunted. "Ain't got time now."

Susan came down to the corral fence, watched him for a moment, then exclaimed, "Judd Kimbrough, you're not going to try to ride that horse!"

"Ain't going to try," he said, securing the blindfold around the squealing pinto's head. "I'm just going to plain ride it. I'll show him!"

"Show who?"

"Henry Hooker, blast him!"

"What's he got to do with it?"

"Everything! I mean, nothing! Oh, damn it, I mean if that little squirt thinks he can show me up —"

"Judd Kimbrough!" Susan flared. "Don't you dare talk that way about Henry!"

He stared at her. "Look here, Susan, last night you said —"

"I was mad last night," Susan cut in, biting her lip.

"Well, now *I'm* mad!" Judd exploded. "And I'm going to show him!"

Susan looked apprehensively at the pinto. "What's breaking that horse got to do with it?"

Judd grinned. "Listen, did you ever see this here pinto run? Fastest thing on four legs in the county. Faster than anything Henry's got. I had figured on getting him gentled for me by Pete Jorgens, but Pete's gone to Denver to a rodeo and won't be back for a week. So I'm just going to up and break him myself."

"You'll break your silly head. Why don't you ask Henry to gentle him for you? He's good with horses."

That was a question Judd disdained to answer. Warning Susan to stand clear, in case the fool horse went through the fence, he gingerly saddled it. He had quite a battle getting a rope halter on it, but, thanks to the snubbing post, the blindfold and sheer bullheaded strength, he managed it. Then, all in one motion, he leaped into the saddle and jerked the blindfold free.

The pinto was so taken by surprise, what with having two hundred pounds of bone and muscle light smack in the middle of his back, that for a second or two he just stood there quivering. Judd jerked at the halter.

"C'mon, hammer-head — give me some action!"

The pinto obliged. His front feet went one way, his hind feet another, and his back humped three different directions at once. Judd stayed with him just two hops, then went sailing through the air and flopped with a bone-jarring thud flat on his back on the ground. Susan screamed.

"Judd! Judd — are you all right?"

He staggered to his feet. "Expected him to do that, first try. Next time I'll stay with him."

Next time he stayed with him for three hops. The ground where he landed didn't seem one bit softer. Slowly he got up, sorted out the six wildly pitching pintos in his vision until his eyes focused on the right one, and then again snubbed up the critter and mounted.

"Got the hang of it now," he called confidently to Susan. "Watch this!"

Two seconds later he was sitting on the ground again, wondering why everything had gotten so dark all of a sudden. A familiar voice drawled, "Keep at it, Judd. You're bouncing higher every time. First thing you know you'll bounce plumb up on his back again an' surprise him so he'll forget to pitch."

Judd struggled to his feet, lurched over to the corral fence and glared

at Henry Hooker, who, dressed in his Sunday best, sat in his buggy with Molly Rankin.

"What are you doing here?"

"Why, I'm taking Molly to church. What are you doing?"

"Any fool can see what I'm doing. I'm breaking a horse."

"Appears to me the horse is breaking you." Henry got down out of the buggy and came over to the fence. "You're going at it the wrong way, Judd. Now if it was me —"

Judd squinted at him, first of a mind to squeeze him into a pulp like a pimple, then of a mind to let him die a more lingering death. "If it was you," he said finally, "what *would* you do?"

"Why, I'd gentle him more gradual."

"Hop to it. I'm willing to watch."

Henry shook his head. "Would, Judd, only I got on my Sunday clothes. Besides, you've spoiled him for gentle breaking. Only way he can be broke now is for somebody that knows how to ride a bad 'un to get on him and ride the orneriness out of his system."

"You're intimatin' *you* could ride him?"

"Well, I got on my Sunday clothes —"

"Which is sure convenient," Judd sneered.

"— but if you was willing to make it worth my while, I might give it a fling. A little bet, say —"

"Fifty dollars?"

"Now that," Henry Hooker said, taking off his coat, "would be worth getting a mite dusty for."

Five minutes later, Henry climbed off the pinto, gave its neck a fond farewell pat and walked over to the post where he had hung his coat. "He ain't so bad after you catch onto his little tricks. You can pay me the fifty tomorrow, Judd. Never like to collect gambling debts of a Sunday."

Judd said hoarsely, "I had him plumb wore down to a nub. Any fool could have rode him."

Henry's eyes glittered. "You want to try it again?"

"Fifty bucks says I can."

"Fifty says you can't."

Grinning broadly, Judd climbed through the fence. He'd sure talked Henry into that one — which just went to show what a man could do if he used his head.

Thirty seconds later, Judd was resting uncomfortably on the portion of his anatomy exactly opposed to his head, same having for the fourth time that morning made contact with the ground with considerable force. Henry Hooker got into the buggy. "Monday, Judd. A hundred bucks."

"Judd Kimbrough, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, betting of a Sunday," Molly said indignantly. "Let's go, Henry. We'll be late for church."

When they had gone, Judd got to his feet, shook his head and said

grudgingly, "Well, you got to admit the little runt is a ridin' fool."

"I'll agree with the fool part!" Susan blazed. "He's everything I said he was last night — and then some!"

Judd scowled. "You stood up for him a while ago —"

"That was a while ago! Before I knew he was throwing himself at that awful flirt Molly Rankin."

"Molly ain't no flirt!" Judd roared.

"Then why does she flaunt Henry under my nose?"

"She wasn't flaunting him! He was flaunting her!"

"Oh, you big stupid ox, go soak your head!"

Muttering, Judd limped toward the house and the liniment bottle. Only it wasn't his head that he figured to soak.

By the next week end Judd's bruises were pretty well healed, except for the black and blue spot on his pride, which was sorer than ever. Day and night it ached like a boil, and he figured it would keep right on aching till he'd showed up Henry Hooker, one way or another.

Saturday night there was a square dance at the schoolhouse, and Molly, to Judd's surprise, agreed to go with him. Then she surprised him again, this time unpleasantly, by saying, "It's only fair I should let you take me — seeing as how I already told Henry he could bring me home."

"You told him *what*?"

"Why, Judd, don't look so upset. It's right on Henry's way."

"It's on my way, too."

"Now, Judd, you know it isn't."

"Well, Goshalmighty, what if it's not? What'll people think when they see me taking you to the dance and Henry taking you home? They'll think I'm the biggest fool on earth!"

Molly laughed. "Will that hurt you?"

Judd stared at her a moment, then muttered, "Molly, you sure got me up a tree. Here I been figuring all along on us getting married. Had it all worked out —"

"All of it?" she said, getting that queer look in her eyes. "What do you mean, all of it?"

"Why, getting you away from this lonesome old house of yours," Judd said, "and taking you home where you'd have a man to look after you and all. That's what I meant."

"That," Molly said with a sigh, "is what I thought you meant."

Susan said she wasn't going to the dance but it didn't take Judd long to make her change her mind. "Don't blame you for not going," he said. "No telling who you'd see Henry there with. It'd be bound to upset you."

Susan looked at him. "I thought Henry was taking Molly."

"Guess you'd better think again."

"You're taking her?"

"Uh-huh."

Susan allowed she might go after all.

Now the way Judd had it figured was this: Susan, who would ride over with the Samuels family, would be there unattached. Henry, being committed to taking Molly home, would be there unattached — and maybe before the evening was over they'd get attached to each other. Which would leave Judd a clear field with Molly.

Or, if that didn't work, maybe he could think up some way to get Molly peeved at Henry. . . .

Saturday evening, Judd had gone out to the barn to hitch up the mare when the idea hit him. Ordinarily he wouldn't have considered it at all, not being a person who would stoop so low as to take advantage of another man's purely human weakness. But right now, Judd was more than ordinarily desperate.

Though not much of a drinking man, Judd usually kept a jug of whiskey around the place in case of snake-bite or some like emergency. It so happened that as he reached for the harness he noticed a full gallon jug of the stuff on the shelf above his hand. He also happened to recall that if there was one thing Molly Rankin disliked it was a man with liquor on his breath. Genial soul that he was, Henry Hooker had never turned down a sociable drink in his life.

Judd scowled at the jug. Didn't seem right to take advantage of Henry that way. Still, Henry was taking advantage of him, wasn't he, being such a runt that they couldn't settle things man to man with their fists? All was fair in love and war, wasn't it?

With the jug hidden under the buggy seat, Judd drove over to Molly's, happier than he'd been for a week. Molly wasn't quite ready when he got there, calling to him from an upstairs window, "I'll be down shortly, Judd. Sit and rest for a spell."

Judd sat down in the swing, admiring the nice evening, the view, dreaming of what all he'd do to make this worn-out section of wheat land into fine cattle graze once he and Molly got married. He admired, too, the pungent, pleasing smell of the Red Rose Toilet Water that permeated the air about him. It had come special order from Kansas City just two days ago and he had doused himself liberally with it after his bath. Roses, he knew, were Molly's favorite flower.

Presently Molly appeared in the doorway and Judd lumbered to his feet. She had on a bright yellow dress and a hat to match, and what with her dark hair and cheeks red from hurrying she looked so nice that Judd burst out, "My, Molly, you sure look pretty!"

The queerest expression came to her face for a moment, then she smiled. "Thank you. You've never told me that before."

"Haven't I? Well, I sure meant to."

She took his arm. "Sorry I'm late, but I've been cleaning house all day. Went over every inch of it on my hands and knees. You've no idea how the dust seeps in."

"Maybe you're too tired to go to the dance," Judd said hopefully. "Maybe we'd just better stay home and sit."

"I'm never too tired to dance," Molly answered, laughing. "Come on, I don't want to miss a set."

Judd was disappointed some as they drove to the schoolhouse that she hadn't complimented him on the way he smelled. Then he consoled himself with the thought that she would probably feel such a compliment overly personal. At the dance things worked out just as he'd hoped they would. Susan did act cold and distant toward Henry at first, but as she warmed to the music and fun she couldn't keep from smiling now and then, and more often than not her smiles were directed at Henry.

But Molly smiled at Henry too, and whenever he'd come over to claim a set with her she would go whirling off with him, with such obvious pleasure that at last Judd decided he'd have to resort to desperate measures. Sauntering over to the door, he caught Henry's eye just as the next set ended and made a slight gesture of his head toward the yard where the buggies were parked. Henry wandered over, his face as innocent as a new-born babe's.

"Fine dance, ain't it, Judd?"

"Sure is. Kind of a hot night though. I could do with a breath of air."

"Come to think about it, so could I."

Judd's rig was parked well away from the schoolhouse, and as the moon hadn't yet come up it was good and dark. They paused and made cigarettes.

"Got something under the buggy seat," Judd said. "Like a snort?"

"Well, I can't say as I —"

"Good stuff. Jim Courtney brewed it."

"He makes the best, all right. But I can't say as I'd ought to —" Henry paused. "You havin' one?"

"What do you think I come out here for?"

"Well," Henry said, "I can't say as I'd ought to let you drink alone."

They went back inside after a spell, Judd chewing hard on a clove he'd secretly slipped into his mouth after tonguing the jug and pretending to drink. But Henry hadn't tongued it, that was for sure. Not by four gurgles, he hadn't. The caller was yelling to choose up partners for another set. Henry said amiably, "Let's see, is it your turn to dance with Molly or is it mine? Seem to have lost track."

"Why, it's yours, I'm sure," Judd said.

"Strikes me it's yours."

"Nope, it's yours," Judd said firmly, gave Henry a friendly slap

on the back and impelled him in Molly's direction. Then he stood there grinning, waiting for things to pop.

Nothing happened. Henry went through the movements of the set more adroitly than ever, making Molly's eyes sparkle with pleasure. Even when Henry was holding both her hands and laughing right into her face, she kept smiling at him — which was downright strange, Judd thought as he chewed on his clove, because usually that Jim Courtney corn gave you a breath that'd knock a coon out of a fifty foot tree.

Then it occurred to him that with so many people on the floor Molly probably had got the notion the fumes weren't emanating from Henry but from somebody else. Judd scowled. There was only one thing to do — keep Henry loaded. If Molly whiffed that fragrance often enough she'd be bound to localize it sooner or later.

The evening wore on. Judd lost track of the number of trips he and Henry made out to the buggy, of the number of times he plugged the neck of that jug with his tongue, of the number of sets that were rightfully his with Molly that he steered Henry into. All he knew was that he sure was sick and tired of chewing cloves.

"My," Molly exclaimed as she stood with Judd watching Henry whirl Susan this way and that so fast her skirts flew, "isn't Henry nimble tonight? Why, the poor boy is dancing so fast he's red in the face."

"Maybe it's something besides dancing makes him red in the face," Judd said.

Molly smiled. "He does like Susan, doesn't he? But I'd never have thought he would blush so."

Judd tried another tack. Scowling, he stared up at the ceiling and muttered, "That's funny."

"What's funny?"

"Smells like one of them alcohol lamps was leaking."

"They're not alcohol lamps, silly. They're kerosene."

"Oh. Well, it couldn't be the lamps, then. But I sure smell something."

"I wouldn't know if you did," Molly said, laughing. "Since using all that ammonia to clean woodwork today, everything smells like ammonia to me."

Judd swallowed his clove. Halfway down his throat it stuck, bringing on a fit of coughing that left him three shades redder than Henry Hooker. Molly ran for a glass of water, pounded him on the back, then said solicitously, "All right now?"

"Oh, sure," Judd said gloomily. "I'm fine."

She smiled up at him, her eyes warm. "You've been awfully sweet tonight, Judd."

"I — I have?"

"You certainly have. Letting Henry have all those dances with me, even though you brought me.

Being so friendly and pleasant to Henry, not acting a bit jealous like you usually do. Not getting mad at anybody. Why, I do believe you've learned your lesson."

Judd stared at her. "Lesson?"

Smiling at Henry and Susan, she slipped her hand into Judd's and whispered, "They're really in love, aren't they? It's so silly of them to let a little spat come between them." She looked at him. "Judd, if you really want to take me home — I mean, it looks like Henry and Susan have made up — and if you, that is, we —"

For the life of him he couldn't think of a word to say, so he just nodded dumbly. Molly squeezed his hand and was gone. The dance ended. He saw her corner Henry and Susan and talk to them for a minute — and from the rate she went on she was really laying down the law. But they seemed to like it, because they were smiling at each other as if there were nobody else in the room.

"Now," Molly said, taking Judd's arm, "it's all straightened out. Let's go home."

The moon had come up. It was fine riding along, letting the mare take her own sweet time, having Molly so close beside him. Fine except for one thing. Clearing his throat, Judd faced it like a man.

"Molly, I got to tell you something."

"Yes, Judd?"

"I done something awful. Only you got to realize the reason why I done it is I love you so much I —"

"You what, Judd?"

"Love you, blast it! That's why I —"

"That's why you want to marry me? Not just to get me away from that lonesome old house? Not because I need a man to take care of me? Not because my land and yours would make such a fine ranch if they were joined together?"

"'Course I love you! How many times do I have to tell you that I love you?"

"Quite a few," she whispered, snuggling close. "But it's the first time that counts the most."

Judd guessed the other matter could wait a spell.

Twenty years, say.

Incident at

She was all alone in the house. The man kicked the door shut, drew his gun, and came toward her . . .

THE sun was getting low and Esther was out in back of the house, pouring sour milk into the hog trough, when she saw the first rising of dust, several miles southward, across the rolling range. She straightened, sucking in her breath and dropping the wooden bucket. Her hands flew to her hair, glinting yellowly in the late sun, hanging tumbled and loose about her shoulders.

She had to wait until the distant rider rose over the next swell of ground and was silhouetted briefly there before she was certain she wasn't seeing things. Then, with a little cry, she scooped up the bucket and flew to the back door. The great, shaggy-haired old dog, sprawled outside the door, looked at her curiously and rose and stretched.

"It's him, Dog," she said. "He's got back early. I hadn't dared hope — hadn't dared pray, hardly — that he'd be back for at least another day." She bent and roughed the dog's shaggy head. Laughter welled out of her, laughter that was almost half crying. She ran on into the house.

It took her some time to pretty up. She'd been a mess. She'd been all day boiling fat, making soap, scented with pine the way Howie liked it. She used some of it now, bird-bathing in panicky haste in the big wooden washtub. Then she put on the dotted red calico that Howie liked so much. She had just finished bunching and coiling her thick

the Bar W

BY

ROBERT TURNER

blonde hair at the nape of the neck when she heard Dog barking crazily and the sound of hoof beats in the yard. Pinching color into her already flushed cheeks, she raced across the clean swept dirt floor, from the kitchen, through the other two rooms of the small ranch house and out onto the verandah. She stopped there.

Dog was crouched about ten yards from the porch, his ears flat, thick hair ruffed around his neck. He'd stopped barking. The deadly growling from deep in his throat was so low it was hard to hear. The man astride the roan gelding looked down at the dog from under a battered, shapeless JB, tilted down over the bridge of his nose.

He was a medium sized man in stiff-dirty levis and dusty brogans. The leather vest he wore over a torn and faded shirt looked several sizes too large for his small frame. He looked up from the dog, then, abruptly, tilted his hat to the other extreme at the back of his head. His high, bony forehead was startlingly white and pale, in contrast to his dust-covered, grimy, bearded face. It was a wedge-shaped face, the wide cheekbones tapering into a very narrow chin. He had hands that looked enormous for a man his size, Esther saw. She saw, too, that one of them hovered near the wooden butt of the .44 thonged down low on his thigh.

"Oh," she said. "Evenin'."

His voice was twangy and high-pitched. "Missus, get that mutt away. I got an achin' to feel ground under my feet for a few minutes."

"Oh," she said again. She wasn't thinking too clearly. The shock and disappointment of this not being her husband, Howie, back from Temple, was just getting to her. "Of course." She called: "Dog! You come here. It's all right, Dog. Come here to me!"

The animal backed off from the stranger a little stiffly, but showed no real inclination to abandon his challenge. Esther clucked her tongue, moved down from the verandah, through the dust of the yard, toward the dog. She reached down and tangled her fingers in the ruffed neck fur, spoke soothingly. The dog stopped his growling and stood there against her leg, panting, his tongue lolling.

"He's not used to strangers," she said. "I don't expect he'll really bother you, though."

The man didn't answer and she looked up. The late sun was right on his face. It shone on his eyes. They were deeply sunken, a strange milky-

gray color under thick lashes like a girl's. They were staring at the low-cut bodice of the calico dress as she half stooped to hold onto the dog's neck fur. Color flooded hotly into her face and she straightened, releasing her grip on the dog.

The man swung down from the saddle, his eyes on the dog now. As he did so, the dog growled menacingly again, started toward him. The man's big, dirty hand, with the black and bitten nails, dropped to the gun.

The high voice said evenly, no fear in it, "If he goes for me, I'll kill him. He'll be dead before he hits the ground."

She darted forward again, grabbed the dog, this time held him tightly by the thick fur behind his head. Now the disappointment was gone and fear began to take its place. Without looking up, staring at the man's dusty brogans, she said: "Perhaps you'd better not stop here, mister. The dog doesn't take to you. Mebbe you'd best ride on."

"Tie him up, then."

She looked up, anger darkening her eyes. "See here," she said sharply, "You've got no call to give orders. Who do you think —"

The sound of his laughter stopped her. It was warmly pleasant. She saw that when he smiled he wasn't bad looking at all. His teeth were even and bone white. "Sorry, ma'am," he said. "You're right, o' course. I meant no harm." He pulled at the bearded skin of his throat. "Didn't mean to bother you none. Just want a little water and to stretch my legs."

"Why, certainly," she told him. "You wait here. I'll get it for you. The well's 'round back."

She turned, dragging the dog with her, then stopped as he said: "What place is this, ma'am?"

"The Bar W," she said. "We own it. My husband's Howie Womble."

"My name's Krebb." She looked back and saw that the smile had twisted on his face and it no longer looked pleasant. "Simon Krebb."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Krebb."

He laughed, this time with a forced, slightly hysterical sound. "*Mister* Krebb," he said. "I like that. That's real funny." The laughing stopped and the grin slipped completely from his face. He looked around. "This is a small spread. Just you and your husband run it?"

She didn't answer for a moment. Esther Womble hated lying. She wasn't good at it. But she knew there were times when it was necessary. She had a feminine intuition that this was one of them. "Of course not," she said, quickly, too quickly. "My husband and the men'll be ridin' in, soon. I — I'd better get you your water."

Still bending over, pulling the dog with her, she walked around the house to the well in the backyard. The dog sprawled in the dust and watched her from his sad eyes as she hoisted up a bucket of water. She sank the dipper into it and lugged

the bucket around to the front, set it down in the dirt.

"Help yourself, Mr. Krebb," she said. "It's good water. The well is deep."

She watched him take a dipperful, drink deeply. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and some of the dust smeared into mud on his lean cheek. "A man gets thirsty." His sunken, pale gray eyes moved over her slowly. "You're a good lookin' woman, Miz Womble. How come you're all decked out so purty, though? Way you come a-tearin' out o' that house, you acted like you might o' been expectin' somebody else. Must be a right smart hunk o' man, this husband o' yours, to make a woman want to doll-up like that for him at day's end, to come rippin' out o' the house to greet him. Reckon I'd like to meet him. You mind I wait aroun' 'til he gets in?"

She backed away from him. Her breath began to hurt in her throat. She wondered if Krebb could hear the sudden drumming of her heart. "Suit yourself." Her own voice sounded too thin and tight. "He'll be here soon. But he won't like the idea of a stranger hangin' 'round when he's not here. It'd be better if you ride on. I — I've got things to do inside." She broke into a half run toward the house. The dog loped beside her, entered the cool dimness of the house with her.

She went instantly to the big old roll top desk in the far corner of the front room, yanked a drawer and fumbled for the loaded Colt Howie had left there for her. At the same time she told herself she was being foolish, getting all spooked-up over nothing. Still, there wasn't any sense taking chances. She turned toward the door with the Colt in her hand. It felt very heavy. She had a moment of panic wondering if she could even squeeze the trigger if she had to.

When Krebb made no attempt to come in after her, she breathed easier, set the gun down on the top of the desk, lit an oil lamp. The warm glow of light in the familiar room made her feel better. Her heart slowed down. Then she heard Dog growl again and whipped around toward the door. Krebb stood there in the doorway, not looking at her, looking at the dog, moving slowly toward him, trembling, crouched, snarling.

She snatched up the Colt, holding it with both hands. "Get out of here!" She screamed it. "I'll set the dog on you!"

"You will?" he said. His voice was almost whisper-soft.

He slowly eased the .44 from his right thigh holster. Almost carelessly he aimed it at the dog's head as the animal sprang at him. The sound of the shot bounced back and forth between the log walls. The dog seemed to stop in mid-air, then fall straight down. His big, shaggy-haired body jerked twice and was still.

Esther stared, stupefied, at the

smoke wisping from the .44, and then her eyes raised to Krebb's face. He was smiling again. It looked like an expression that was pasted on his face now, and the even white teeth looked like a skull's teeth against his sunken, bearded cheeks. He stepped over the dog's body, shucking the .44 back into its holster. He walked slowly toward her. For the first time she realized that he was quite small for a man, scarcely an inch or so taller than she. But his hands looked larger than ever. She had no illusions that she would be a match for him. He was wiry and hard.

"Missy," he said. "Put down that iron. It don't frighten me none. I've seen 'em before." His high, hysterical laugh bubbled out. "You know who I am? Know who your *Mister* Krebb is? If you ain't heard about me, you will. The news'll get down this way, sometime. I'm the Si Krebb from Alder City. Does that —"

He broke off, ducked his head approvingly. Here in the lampglow his deeply set eyes looked completely colorless, as though without pupils. At the mention of Alder City, sickness wrenched at Esther's stomach and her mouth got acidy. Three days ago a drummer had stopped by, told her about the express holdup in Alder City, a hundred miles north, and the bandit who had shot three men in the street in broad daylight.

"Damn, you're purty, though," he said. "Especially when your eyes go all big with fear like that. Put that Colt down, Missy, afore you shake it plumb to pieces."

The weakness of her voice frightened her as she managed: "Stand still. If you come any closer to me, I'll shoot. I'm not afraid to shoot. I've got a right."

He stopped, watching the finger she held over the trigger whiten. He looked doubtful for the first time. He poked out his full lower lip. His eyes swung from her around the room. They stopped at the huge family Bible on a table. They went on to the only wall decorations, framed needle-work quotations from the Bible, most of them from the twenty-third Psalm.

"You wouldn't kill any one," he said. His tongue licked his dried lips. "That would be breakin' a Commandment. You wouldn't do that, lady. Remember what it says: 'Thou shalt not kill'."

The sickness was all through her, now, making her feel faint. For a moment, his small, lean figure blurred before her eyes. Then her vision cleared again and she saw he was moving toward her once more. He said: "Put it down. You ain't goin' to shoot. You know that. You're one o' these Holy-Josies, lady. Put the Colt down. Or do you want me to take it away from you?"

Waves of blood beat in her ears, dulling the sound of his voice and her own as she answered: "There are other commandments. If — if I have to take a choice of breakin' one

of 'em, it'll be that one. Please! Please go back, go away from here, don't make me do this."

He was very close now. His eyes kept moving over her, lingering on the fast rise and fall of her bosom under the calico dress. Perspiration began to pinpoint on the whiteness of his forehead. He still wore the Stetson pushed way back on his head. His hair was a dullish brown, short-cropped and mussed. He kept licking his lips and his breathing suddenly seemed as harsh as hers. She could smell the stink of him now, he was so close.

He took another step, said: "I thought I was goin' to have to wait until I got to Mexico for this. I didn't reckon on luck like this, findin' a woman on a place, all alone. Especially a looker like you. You must not been out in this country long. Another few years and you'll be leathery and dried-up like the rest o' 'em. But, *now*. . . ."

His voice trailed off. He rubbed his big hands up and down the sides of his levis. Then he reached them out toward her. She went back against the wall. He kept coming. "Don't be loco," he said. "Put down the gun. What difference is it goin' to make?" He smiled crookedly, his breath whistling through his noise. "No difference at all. In fact, mebbe, if your ol' man's been away quite a spell . . . ."

He stopped talking. He shivered all over and sucked in a breath noisily and came at her. All she could see was his face. It seemed to swell and get big like a Hallowe'en pumpkin, like the macabre grin on the carved-out face of that first Hallowe'en pumpkin she'd ever seen, back when she was a child and it had frightened her so she'd run screaming in off the twilit New England street to her father's rectory. And then the face seemed to explode and was gone.

It seemed like a long time later that she heard the sound of the shot or the echo of it; she didn't know which. She finally let the smoking Colt fall to the earthen floor of the house. She stood quivering and staring straight ahead. It was a long time before she could force herself to look down. He looked pitifully small, now, ineffectual, all bunched up there on the floor in a little heap. She ran past him, the terrible crying finally breaking from her. She kneeled down by the dead dog and lifted his head and held it against her. She stayed there like that for a long time until the crying stopped, when there was finally no more in her.

Then, floating buoyantly through a dream-like fog, something like the way she'd felt when the fever took her last winter, she went to work. She didn't hardly think about what she was doing. It was as though she was an automaton, obeying impulses from outside herself. First she changed into old clothes. Then she buried Dog, by lantern light, out in the back yard. Next she dragged

Krebb's body outside. It took her some time and she was trembling weak and nauseous at the end but she managed to work the body up onto the saddle of the roan gelding. She roped it on there as best she could. She turned the horse, heading it south toward the next ranch, twenty miles away, sharply whipped the critter's flank with the end of the rope, and sent him galloping. The last she saw of Krebb he was listing grotesquely from the saddle. But he didn't fall off. . . .

It was the middle of the next day when Howie got back. He picked her up and whooped and hollered as he swung her around. Then he set her down and held her away from him, his broad, ruddy face going serious, his eyes searching her. "Lordy, Esther, I've been scared," he said. "Half out of my mind, worrying about you, alone here. All the while I was away I had this crazy feeling that something had happened to you. Everything was all right?"

This was the moment she had dreaded. In this long hard first year out here, many times she had known that Howie suffered doubts about her ever fitting into this life. Now, if he learned how badly she'd handled that situation yesterday, he would be convinced. He'd want her to go back East. At least until after the baby arrived. Yet she couldn't lie to Howie. She could never do that.

When she didn't answer right away, his hands squeezed into her shoulders. "Esther! What's the matter? You — you're trembling, honey. Something *did* happen, didn't it?"

In desperation, hardly knowing what she was saying, she blurted: "Howie, the dog! He's dead."

"Dog?" His eyes darkened with concern. "Dead? That's right, he *didn't* run out to meet me. I was so crazy over seein' you again. I didn't — What happened, Esther? How did he die?"

Panic stormed in her, remembering Simon Krebb and the killing she'd been forced to commit. It all broke from her in half-crying incoherency. "I—I couldn't help it, Howie. I *had* to shoot him, kill him. He was going to attack me." She shuddered. "He — why, he was like some awful crazy thing! He —"

"Good Lord, Esther!" He went white. His voice broke sharply. "Why, you might have been killed, torn to ribbons! A rabid dog is the most dangerous thing in the world." He held her tightly. "Thank God you were quick enough, smart enough to shoot him before he could get to you!"

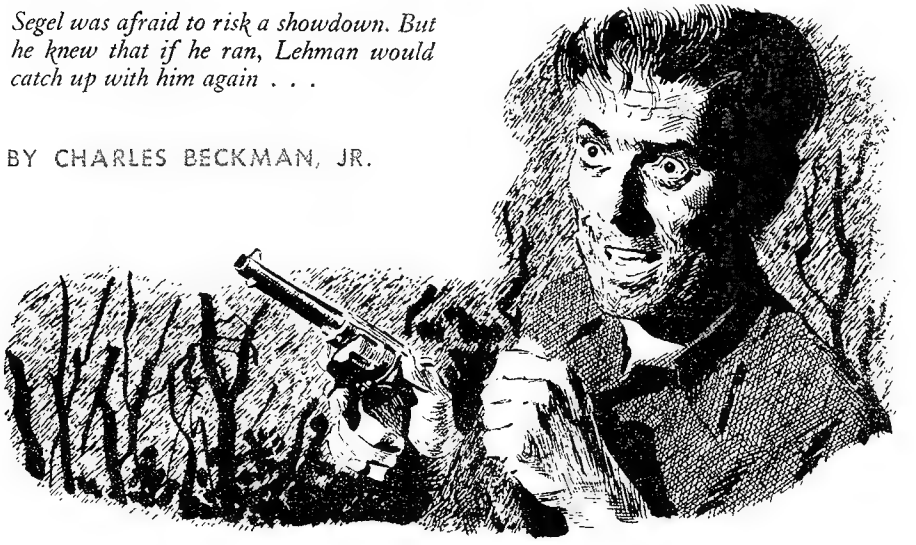
He held her a little away from him, his eyes full of fear for her. "You *are* all right, aren't you?"

She brushed hot tears from her lashes, and said a small prayer at the miracle of how he'd twisted her words. "No, he didn't hurt me." She started to pull him toward the house. "No more talking, now. Just pretend you were never away. Come on. Dinner's waiting."

SHOWDOWN

Segel was afraid to risk a showdown. But he knew that if he ran, Lehman would catch up with him again . . .

BY CHARLES BECKMAN, JR.



DAVE SEGEL awoke with a start, reaching for his gun with the instinctive movement of a hunted animal. He lay half-crouched on his blanket, peering into the Stygian blackness with red-rimmed eyes. He had picked this spot shrewdly, knowing that the tangled brush surrounding it would give warning. And he had been right. For it had been the muffled crack of a twig snapping under a stealthy foot that had penetrated his fitful dozing and brought him wide awake.

Now he sat stiffly, not moving, scarcely breathing — straining his ears. Rivulets of perspiration trickled down his ribs and glued his shirt to his back in cold, sticky patches. His heart was a muffled tom-tom thudding in his ears. He heard many things. The *chirrup* of a cricket, the

warble of a mocking bird, the distant howl of a coyote. And nearby, the stealthy, relentless movement of a heavy body, working through the brush. . . .

An unconscious whimper escaped his constricted throat. *Didn't that devil Lehman ever sleep?*

Stealthily, he rose to his feet. He looked around wildly. Not here in the smothering darkness. He didn't want the showdown with Lehman to come here. The German rancher was a devil who never slept and could see in the dark like a cat.

The showdown was coming soon, now, Segel knew. There was no longer strength left in him to run. But he didn't want to match guns with Lehman here. He wanted it to be in daytime when he at least had a chance, no matter how slim. If he had to die, he didn't want it to be in this hellish blackness.

His horse was tied close by. The horse was hard-ridden, nearly done for. The last two nights, Segel had even been afraid to take the saddle off for long. Lehman, he knew, was closer. He had somehow felt that the months of running were over and the end of the trail was very near, now.

He didn't bother with the blanket. He crawled into the saddle, nudged his weary horse into the thicket. Branches slapped at him and thorns scratched his face, but he didn't notice. A few miles further on, he knew, was Hempstead, Texas. It would be just as well to finish it there, where it had started months ago. . . .

Hours later, in the small, dark hours of morning, he rode into the town. He had not heard Lehman for the last half hour or more. Once, hope would have flickered in his breast. He would have slept, had breakfast, procured a fresh horse, and ridden on, refreshed in the hope that he was out-distancing the rancher. But now he knew it was hopeless. Three times in the last year, he had given Lehman the slip. Once in San Antonio, once in Laredo, and there had been the time in Monterrey, when he'd slipped through the back door of a saloon and had completely eluded Lehman for nearly a month, only to discover the man once again on his trail.

And the hell of it was knowing that Lehman could have killed him a dozen times in the past months. Knowing that the devil was playing with him, cat-like. And not knowing when Lehman would tire of the game and send a bullet crashing into his back. . . .

He got a hotel room and lay on the hard bed, staring up at the ceiling. He drank steadily from a bottle of raw whiskey. But it was a useless, futile gesture. Whiskey no longer had any effect on him. He was tired, bone-weary to his soul, and whiskey was just like water to him.

He watched the dark window gradually grow pale with the light of dawn. He watched the ceiling

take outline above him, and he listened to a small town waking up. He heard early risers stirring on the rotted boardwalks below his window. The clink and rattle of a wagon. Storekeepers, calling to one another as they opened shop. The splash of fresh water spilling into a watering trough.

He got up and looked into the cracked dresser mirror.

Once, he had many friends in this town. They would not recognize him now, he knew.

Not this skeleton of a man with gaunt, stubble-crusted cheeks drawn tightly over the craggy bones. His eyes, haunted shadows in deep sockets, were bleary from countless sleepless nights. His hair was matted and his clothes were stained with sweat and dust.

When he lifted his fingers to his cheek, they were trembling as if from an extremely painful palsy.

He moved to the window, holding himself stiffly against the wall. He looked down, across the street, and he saw Lehman.

The man was propped against a building, his sombrero pulled low over his eyes. He was rolling a cigarette and he watched the hotel steadily. He didn't take his eyes off the hotel's front door.

Segel's throat worked. He stumbled back to the bed, drained the last of the whiskey.

Then he took his pistol out, broke it open with shaking fingers and checked the loads while tears filled his eyes. The gun felt heavy.

He slid it back into the holster. Then he half crouched there in the hotel room, and practiced a fast draw.

His numb hand fumbled clumsily, almost dropping the gun before he could get it out.

A broken sob wrenched from his throat.

Why hadn't he had this showdown with Lehman months ago, when he'd still had enough strength?

He went downstairs, then, because there was nothing left for him to do.

With dragging feet, he moved across the hotel lobby, telling himself he wasn't going to be afraid . . . he was going to stand up to Lehman and do his best.

He whispered to himself reassuringly. He mustn't be afraid because then he'd do a lousy job on his draw.

But when he reached the door and saw August Lehman across the street through a bleary haze, his nerve snapped like a brittle twig. A scream wrenched from his throat. And he started running. Blindly. His boots pounded the walk in great ragged, stumbling steps.

His breath came in gasping sobs. And he ran all the faster, knowing that Lehman was on his heels, drawing his gun to finish this thing for the final time.

He rounded the corner blindly. He didn't see the morning stage coming down the street at a gallop because it was late. The driver saw him.

The driver stood up in his seat, yelling, heaving on the reins, tramping his brake. But it was already too late.

Dave Segel died under pounding hooves and grinding wheels with a single piercing scream.

The whole town heard the scream. Storekeepers ran out to where the stage had stopped in a cloud of dust. Across the street from the *Hempstead Hotel*, Sheriff Dawson, who had been standing in the morning sun, rolling a cigarette and sunning himself, thumbed his hat up and broke into a run.

He pushed through the crowd to the mangled body.

"Who was it?"

One of the men kneeling over the dead man looked up. "I'd swear it was that young Dave Segel. Remember him, Sheriff? Had a spread near here. Him and that partner of his, that German fellow, August Lehman. Remember, about two years ago, August Lehman was murdered in his bunk one night. Shot in the back while he was sleeping. There was a lot of talk that maybe Dave Segel had done it. So's he'd own the whole ranch by himself. But nothin' could ever be proved. . . ."

The sheriff nodded. "Segel started drinking after that. Acted kinda crazy and finally disappeared. Well," he said, "he and Lehman are together now. They can settle their score in Hell."

ROUNDUP

If there's any resemblance between this picture of *Nelson Nye* and the one of *Frank O'Rourke* which we ran in our last issue, it's not because they're twin brothers. We must shamefacedly admit that our printers ran Nye's picture over O'Rourke's name. However, *this is Nye* and the photo came from him out in Tucson, Arizona where he raised horses and writes fine stories like *Homecoming* in this issue on page 38.

Steve Frazee is essentially a Western writer. He lives in the West, and he writes stories about the West — usually. The fact that the first mystery he ever wrote recently copped the first prize of $2,000 in a national mystery story contest, doesn't alter this general premise. He's had four Western novels published, the last of which is *Sharp The Bugle Calls* — but he's also the author of *Shining Mountains*, and his publishers are now readying his second full-length adventure job, *Operation Blue Peak*.

Bill Gulick has been scribbling for a living for some thirteen years, during which time he's published a hundred or so shorts, serials, etc. in several dozen magazines from the Western pulps to adventure mags, women's mags, "The Saturday Evening Post and what-have-you." He's also done a couple of books for boys, and a couple of Western novels, the first of which was made into a movie retitled *Bend Of The River*. He further adds: "As hobbies I do a bit of vegetable gardening (which my agent deplores) and dabble in amateur theatricals (also a time-consumer, but we can't work all the time, can we?). I'm game for anything that keeps me away from the typewriter — as what writer isn't?"

Bennett Foster says this about himself: "I'm married and we have two boys and a girl, all grown and one of the boys married. All the kids are in college, the boys at A&M and the girl studying piano in a St. Louis conservatory. We live in Albuquerque and like it. I got to India for a year but I don't write about India, a man writes about what he knows."

We would, as a matter of fact, have been delighted to get our hands on a photo of *Frank O'Rourke* but the gent is extremely camera shy. His agent has no picture of him, and his publisher's files are also bare of any photographs. As a matter of record, his Western novels (*Action at Three Peaks, Thunder On The Buckhorn*, and *Blackwater*) all carried jackets which were void of any resemblance to the writer. Which is a good way of saying he'll let his yarns speak for themselves — and they do that very well.

H. A. De Rosso says: "I wrote my first story in March 1935 while still in high school. It did not sell and neither did 78 others which followed. Finally, in April 1941, after six years of trying, the 80th story I'd written was taken by Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine. To date, I've had 167 stories published. Most of these were Westerns, though I've also sold several science-fiction novelettes and half a dozen mystery yarns. One of my Western serials appeared in Collier's." He's also had two Western novels published, *Tracks in The Sand* and *.44*. Practically all of his Westerns are set in the Southwest, with partiality going to New Mexico and mountains. In conclusion, De Rosso adds: "I am single, if that means anything."

IN THIS ISSUE . . .

FINAL PAYMENT

. . . I looked at his face and eyes, and I did not know him.

"Had a good look?" he asked sharply.

"You've changed," I said.

"You ought to know," he said bitterly. "You pulled the strings and I worked on all the miserable, stinking, dirty jobs they could find in that hell hole of a prison."

"All right," I said. "I pulled the strings. You deserved it. I came here to talk business, Billy. You read the letter, didn't you?"

He lifted it from the table and shook it gently. "A nice little document, Henry. Tell me, how much did you have to do with offering me this pardon?"

"What's the difference?" I said. "There it is. Do you accept the offer?"

"Don't you remember what you told me the day I went up, Henry?" Billy said. "No parole, never, not while good old law-abiding Henry lived. I'm wondering why you changed your mind, and if you helped engineer the deal."

"I helped," I said. "I'm not trying to conceal my motives, Billy. We want that gang and we want them fast!"

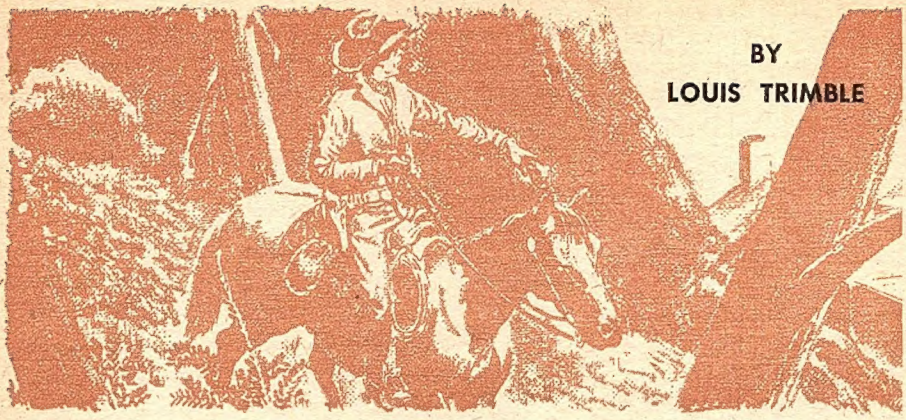
READ: FINAL PAYMENT by Frank O'Rourke, the story of the desperate deal a lawman is forced to make with a killer . . . for the bigger stakes involved.

Plus new stories by: **JACK SCHAEFER, BENNETT FOSTER, BILL GULICK, STEVE FRAZEE, H. A. DE ROSSO, LOUIS TRIMBLE, NELSON NYE,** ***and many others***

ALL NEW—ALL IN THIS ISSUE—ALL TOP WESTERN FICTION

Ex-convicts aren't allowed to carry guns. Dode thought about that as he put the Colt in his pocket.

BY NELSON NYE



BY
LOUIS TRIMBLE

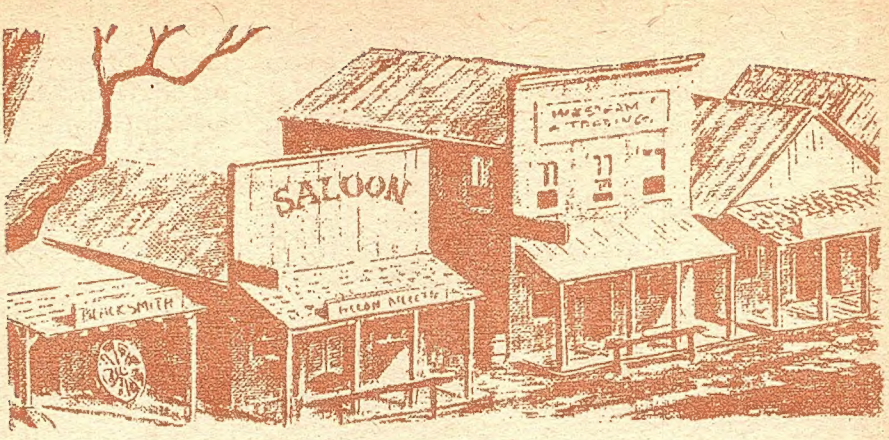
NO GUNS

WHEN Herne rode into town that evening he knew there would be trouble. He was bringing it.

He came the long way from his place on the edge of Horse Mesa, swinging around the bare hills that rose back of Vigilance and riding into town just at sunset. The single dusty street lay quiet at this, the dinner hour. Later, when the stored heat from the late spring sun had been sucked into the air and dissipated, people would begin moving about again up and down the board walks, in and out of the stores, open because it was Saturday night.

And the men from the ranches would begin coming into the saloons, looking to hone the edges from their thirst. Round-up was just over and many a man had not been in town for over a month. It was that way with Herne himself. And, he knew, with Sid Beeck. He was sure Sid hadn't been in town on Saturday night this past month because he and Sid had been having it out on Horse Mesa for longer than that now.

He rode in and left his horse and went looking for Sid Beeck. He stopped first at the Stockman's Bar and had whiskey to sharpen his appetite. He was a rangy man, young and lean and hard-muscled, his darkly tanned face set and angry now in such a way that the two old



The two men had fought each other since they'd been kids. But this time the fight was different. This time, it was for keeps.

timers at the bar moved farther along when he took his place.

The bartender poured the whiskey to the brim of the glass, "Seen Sid Beeck?" Herne asked.

"Not since before round-up. Nor you either."

Herne gulped his whiskey, feeling it warm him and relax him a little after the fast push from Horse Mesa. He said, "If you see Sid, tell him I'm looking for him."

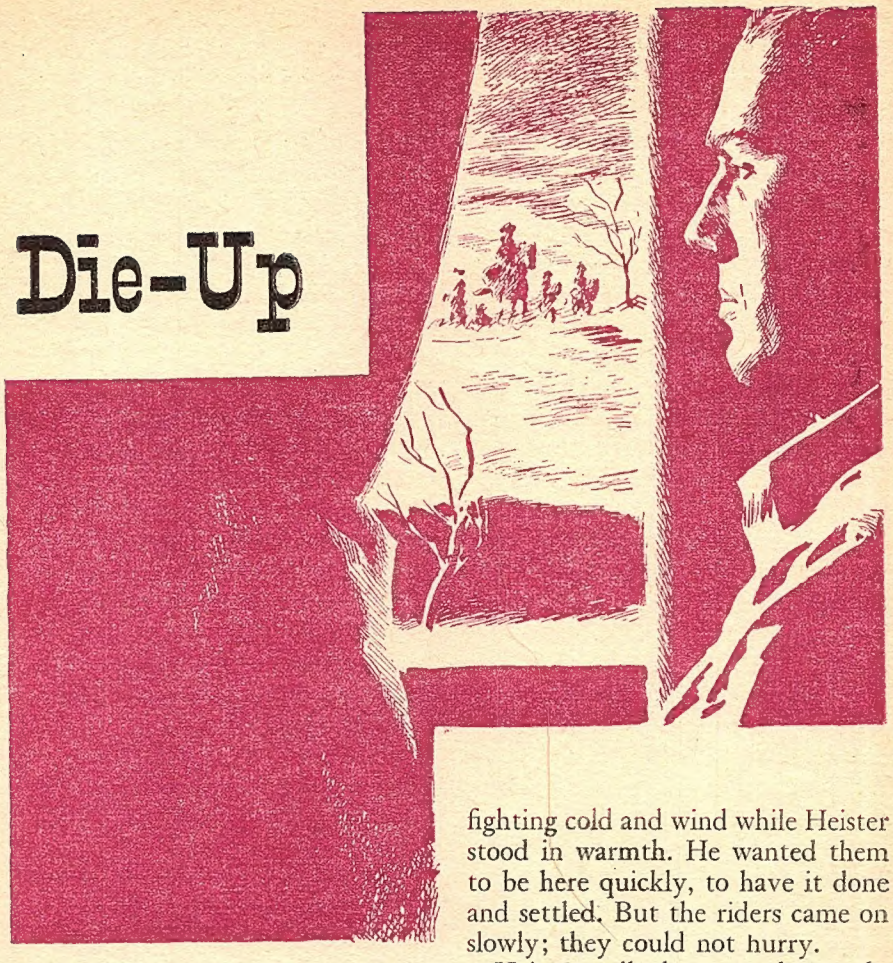
As he started out, one of the old timers told the bartender, "Him and Sid Beeck been looking for each other ever since they was big enough to crawl. Had their first fight over a toy six shooter when they was less'n two years old."

Herne went on out, stopping at the next saloon, not for a drink, but to see if Sid Beeck had changed his hang-out. But there was only a two handed poker game going on between the hardware man and a dealer and there was no one else in the place besides the help. Herne hitched his trousers and went across the street to the hotel for dinner.

He ate slowly and methodically, satisfying his hunger thoroughly as he did everything else. But this night he did not seem to be enjoying himself as he usually did. When Mike Tate, the marshal, came in, he seemed to notice this and he dropped into a chair by Herne.

"You look sour as hell, boy. I

Die-Up



couldn't question Beckett's loyalty. The man thought one thing and was blunt in saying so, and yet he would stand solidly beside Heister if there was need.

There was a disturbing edge in the thought, just as there was something mildly painful in watching men fighting cold and wind while Heister stood in warmth. He wanted them to be here quickly, to have it done and settled. But the riders came on slowly; they could not hurry.

Heister walked out on the porch. His woodpile was still as large as some ranchers had laid in for the entire winter. You expected the worst and prepared for it. If you got less, that was a dividend. The long sheds in the west field were full of cattle. The sides of Heister's haystacks showed dark against the land. Some of those snow-rounded stacks

Judd had lots of trouble waiting for Henry. Tempting trouble, in a big corked jug.

BY BILL GULICK

The

FRESH from his Saturday evening bath, and dressed in his best courting clothes, Judd Kimbrough reached for a brush to give his curly blonde hair a final lick. *Ping!* Like a shot, a button flew off his skin-tight pink silk shirt and bounced against the bureau mirror. Swearing, Judd pawed for it.

"Susan!" he roared downstairs at his sister. "Hey, Susan, come up here a minute!"

"What for?"

"Lost a button."

"If you think I'm going to run all the way up those stairs just to find a button for you —"

"Goshalmighty, Susan, I know where the fool thing is! Got it right here in my hand. I mean I lost it off my shirt.